



Jesus's direct experiences of God the Father: a paradox within Jewish theology and gateway to human experience of God

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Abstract

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With the unavailability of a consistently similar and collectively accepted biblical definition of a 'direct experience of God', this article sets out to explore Jesus's direct experience of God the Father within the Hebrew environment, which states that no one can see God 'face to face' and live (Exod. 33:17-20). An immediate or direct experience of God is no doubt biblically rooted, but the nature and understanding thereof is largely a product of philosophers and theologians within the context of their worldviews. This article makes the case that Jesus had immediate experiences of God the Father, and this operates from the position that a direct experience of God is a fundamental property of the human reality. It sets out to explore the intimate nature and characteristics of Jesus's immediate experiences of God the Father. This is done in the light of the paradoxical religious considerations of the Israelites (Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:20) where God said to Moses: 'You cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live.' But Genesis 32:30 records Jacob as saying: 'For I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.' While the paradox is furthered by John 1:18: 'No one has seen God at any time ...', Christians in Paul's time appear to have departed from such Hebraic reticence. The article sets out to identify some characteristics of Jesus's direct experiences of the Father and use these as a yardstick to

measure the plausibility of human experiences of God. Complying with the limitations imposed on the scope of this article, the vastness of this topic has been restricted to what is reasonable within these confines.

Opsomming

Jesus se direkte ervarings van God: 'n paradoks in Joodse teologie en deurgang na die menslike ervaring van God

Met die onbekomaarheid van 'n konsekwent-ooreenstemmend en gesamentlik aanvaarde bybelse definisie van 'n 'direkte ervaring van God', gee hierdie artikel 'n uiteensetting van Jesus se direkte ervarings van God die Vader binne die Hebreeuse milieu wat bepaal dat geen mens God van aangesig tot aangesig kan sien en bly leef nie (Eks. 33:17-20). 'n Onmiddellike of direkte ervaring van God is sonder twyfel in die Bybel gewortel, maar die aard en begrip daarvan is grootliks die resultaat van filosowe en teoloë se werk binne die konteks van hulle eie wêreldbeskouings. Hierdie artikel maak die stelling dat Jesus wel onmiddellike ervarings van God die Vader gehad het en dat dit funksioneer vanuit die posisie dat 'n direkte ervaring van God 'n wesenseienskap van die menslike werklikheid is. Dit verken die intieme aard en eienskappe van Jesus se onmiddellike ervarings van God die Vader. Dit vind plaas in die lig van die paradoksale godsdiestige oorwegings van die Israeliete (Gen. 32:30; Eks. 33:20) waar God vir Moses sê: 'Vir my kan jy nie sien nie, want geen mens kan vir my sien en bly leef nie.' Maar volgens Genesis 32:30 sê Jakob: 'Ek het God van aangesig tot aangesig gesien en tog het ek nie omgekom nie.' Hierdie paradoks word voortgesit deur Johannes 1:18: 'Niemand het God ooit gesien nie' Dit blyk dat Christene in Paulus se tyd wegbeweeg het van die sodanige Hebreeuse terughoudendheid dat God nie direk ervaar kan word nie. Die artikel poog om 'n paar eienskappe van Jesus se direkte ervarings van die Vader te identifiseer en as 'n maatstaf te gebruik om die geloofwaardigheid van menslike ervarings van God te meet. In ooreenstemming met die beperking wat geplaas is op die bestek van die artikel, is die omvang van die onderwerp beperk tot wat redelik is binne die grense hiervan.

1. Introduction

The concept *direct experience of God* is a term frequently used by theologians and often without adequate clarification regarding its meaning today. The understanding thereof has become increasingly complicated by the progression of secularisation. In the context of postmodern secularisation it is often asserted that contemporary people cannot have direct experiences of God, since their own

secularised existence had declared God “dead”. Alternatively, it is asserted that it is impossible since God is a “transcendent reality” (Rahner, 1989:57) and not just another person distinct from humanity, as stated in Karl Rahner’s terminology. Access to the privilege of experiencing God directly is an important issue, and although long predominant, it is still in need of clarification. This is of particular importance within the upsurge of interest in mysticism (both Eastern and Western), as well as in active Pentecostalism and charismatic movements, in which an *immediate or direct experience of God* is also frequently claimed.

This article sets out to explore the nature of Jesus’s direct experiences of God, in the light of the Hebrew axiom that no one could see God face to face and live (Exod. 33:11). Yet, God is said to have spoken to Moses “face to face” as a person speaks to a friend (Exod. 33:11). This article expresses the opinion that, if the characteristics of Jesus’s direct or immediate experience of God can be identified, light may be thrown on the plausibility of a human person’s claim to a direct experience of God. In the effort to determine the characteristics of Jesus’s immediate experiences of the Father, the article keeps cognisance of the fact that the gospel accounts of Jesus’s Abba-experiences took place and were narrated, in an environment that adhered to a belief system that renders the human person unworthy of a direct experience of God. Because of this milieu, this article deems it necessary for the concept *direct experience of God* to be further refined and elucidated, since it points to crucial issues for Christian faith and practice.

This article operates from the stance that a direct experience of God is something inherent to humanity, an anthropological gift. It, therefore, proposes that the identification of the characteristics of Jesus’s immediate experiences of the Father could function as the necessary yardstick or point of reference to measure or illuminate the authenticity of human claims to direct experiences of the Divine. For this reason it focuses specifically on some of Jesus’s direct experiences of God the Father – not only because the gospels attest to the fact that Jesus had numerous direct experiences of his Father (also known as the Abba experiences), but also to ascertain to what extent did Jesus’s direct Abba experiences either cancel out or counteract the specific Hebrew faith tenet of no direct experiences of God unless at the cost of death (Exod. 33:20).

In addition, this article wishes to establish whether the unique and intimate experiences which Jesus had of his Father present an unconditional assurance that a direct experience of God emerged as

indispensable – not only to the foundational period of Christianity, but also for believers today. In the effort to build a contemporary theological approach to human experience of God, it is deemed necessary that the article provides some measure of how the human person is constituted in relation to the Divine in the sense that an immediate experience of God presupposes a God-given dynamism of the human spirit towards God, who is regarded as the *Absolute transcendent*. The imperative question related to the theological problem is whether these immediate experiences of God the Father, in which Jesus's human existence was deeply rooted, provide the necessary authorisation for humanity to have an immediate experience of God in human history. Can a direct experience of God, which is undoubtedly perceived as the nucleus of all religions, be regarded as an indispensable dimension of humanity's existence and meaningful experience of reality? In summary, this article wishes to establish whether the biblical notion of human unworthiness still operates as a way of disclaiming any direct experience of God, thus rendering the notion of an immediate experience of God as a mere fallacy for the human person.

2. The Hebrew notion of an immediate or direct experience of God

Since Jesus was a Jew there is no doubt that his direct experiences of God the Father (and the Holy Spirit) occurred within the ambience of the belief systems of the people into which He was born. In the light of Hebrew tradition, as recorded in the Old Testament, Y-H-V-H¹ was a continually experienced reality. The Hebrews adhered to a worldview, constituted by their living experience, in which the idea of a human-divine encounter was generally considered a natural and necessary phenomenon of human existence. For the Hebrews, experiences of the spiritual dimension of reality formed part of their understanding of how they perceived the nature of Y-H-V-H and of the created universe, both physical and non-physical. Since the spiritual dimension of reality formed an integral part of their life, contact with it, whether in the form of visions, fantasies, dreams, poetic-inspiration, ecstasy or religious experience, was not considered as

1 (Y-H-V-H, yud-hei-vav-hei). This is known in English as the tetragrammaton (from the Greek for “the four consonants”). The Jewish people came to regard the divine name so sacred that it was not mentioned. Within the Jewish tradition the Hebrew term *Adonai*, meaning “my Lord” or *Hashem*, meaning “the Name” became an indirect substitute. Modern academic scholars use the reconstruction as “Yahweh” (Eskenazi & Weiss, 2008:316).

something out of the course of natural human events. In fact, they not only believed in the spiritual dimension of reality, but regarded such experiences as imperative. For this reason myth, legend, story and saga played significant roles in the symbolic descriptions of encounters with this dimension of reality. The mythic-poetic imagery indicated to the finite human intellect the existence of the ineffable infinite. The myths, however, were not completely divorced from reality, but provided a way to speak about aspects of reality about which little or nothing could be said using ordinary language.

In the context of this worldview where the spiritual dimension of reality is considered a vital aspect of a wholesome existence, God is not a philosophical abstract, but is known in the light of a shared and lived experience. The God that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses experienced was the “true” and living God of the Old Testament faith. The Hebrew people experienced their God as profoundly near, intimately close, and the term *gignosko*² (to know, to experience) was very often used to accentuate the immediacy of their relationship with Yahweh (Nemeck & Coombs, 1985:19). Yet, the Hebrew Scriptures also testified to the understanding and experience of God as profound mystery, and the Hebrews respected the essential “unknowability” of the true God. The possibility of seeing this God, in particular of seeing the face of Y-H-V-H, would have been an exceptional privilege. However, it was also perceived as a dangerous experience, because seeing the face of God meant certain death (Exod. 33:20).

The Hebrew understanding of the unworthiness of human nature is implicit in their acceptance of the consequence of such an encounter. Parallel to this perception of human nature is the Hebrew theological understanding of God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. The Hebrews frequently resort to the language of paradox, as evident in the Sinai revelation (Exod. 33), to explain how God could be more, or differently present in particular places. These contradictory beliefs could, as Dunn (1975:3-4) says, discount “the creative force of religious experience”. In this regard Philip Almond (1982:166-167) notes that the power of a religious experience could relate to the creative transformation of a religious tradition, as was seen in the revelatory nature of Jesus’s direct

2 *Gignosko* comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means *knowledge* with special emphasis upon knowledge of God and of the nature and destiny of humanity.

experiences of God the Father and the Holy Spirit which was, according to Hurtado (2000:189), often characteristic of a reformulation or reconfiguration of religious convictions.

Jesus's experiences of God the Father and of the Holy Spirit took place within the Jewish milieu that abided respectfully by the fundamental principle that God cannot directly be seen or portrayed. The primary question asked by this article is what is meant when Jesus had an immediate or direct experience of God. According to the Hebrew Scriptures an experience of God occurred either in dreams, visions or face-to-face encounters. The face-to-face experience of God was wrapped in mystery, and for the Hebrews it was imperative that this mystery had to be preserved, particularly by the discretion of speech; hence the constraint shown in Hebrew spirituality in uttering the Divine Name. The apparently obscure vision the Hebrews had of the true and living God contrasted sharply with the false gods of Israel's neighbours. Their idols could be seen directly, their forms delineated, their nature conceptualised, and their territories and limits defined (Leech, 1985:162). As explained by Leech (1985:162), the God of the Hebrews is not knowable in that sense and with that kind of directness; it was rather an experience whereby they were fully conscious of the mysterious and ineffable nature of God, and an awareness of the inevitability thereof. To experience the innermost being of God was to experience God in a direct but mysterious way. The two aspects went hand in hand. Hence, in the context of this perception of God, the word *panîm*, *countenance* or *face* is the anthropomorphic symbol of presence, of direct encounter of the presence of God. When, however, the word is used with the verb of visual perception, *to see God face to face*, the term refers to the essence and glory of God (Terrien, 1978:146). To have seen the face of God is to have experienced the innermost being of God. It is still, however, in obscurity and hiddenness that something of God's divine radiance is perceived.

2.1 Human unworthiness and direct experience of God

The Hebrew idea of the human person's unworthiness operated as a restraining factor in claiming a direct experience of God, whether visual, audible or of any other kind. The understanding that a person had to perish if she/he looked on God or even if she/he heard God's voice (Num. 4:20) made people reluctant to claim a direct experience of God and often people had to cover their faces in God's presence. Manoah exclaimed "we are doomed to die, we have seen God" (Judg. 13:22). Yet, this did not diminish humanity's innate

desire to experience God directly, however terrifying. As said by Terrien (1978:xvii), it is the nature of the human person to seek God and the nature of God to seek humanity. Although God was regarded as absolutely transcendent, wholly other and veiled in darkness, God was nevertheless believed to be intimately near to, and was the light of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Yahweh was experienced as the object of their deepest human desires, searching and yearnings. To be united with the living God was life itself. The Hebrews, however, remained reluctant to claim themselves worthy of any direct experience of God, since the qualitative experience between God and humanity always prevailed. It appears that the claim to have had a face-to-face experience of God communicates a vision of God that is simultaneously transcendent and intimately protective. If Jesus's direct experience of God the Father and Holy Spirit occurred in this faith context, this article is of opinion that the nature of Jesus's experiences would have contravened the long-standing belief of his people, which was that one cannot have a face-to-face, *panîm-el-panîm* (direct) experience of God and live. How then, did the Hebrew people understand this expression of *panîm-el-panîm*?

2.1.1 The expression *panîm-el-panîm*³

The expression *panîm-el-panîm*, as used in the Hebrew Scriptures, literally means the face of EL, and is used, above all, for the face of God (Y-H-V-H). It also sometimes refers to a special relationship of God to a human person. Terrien observes that the term should not be construed as referring literally to visual perception. He describes it as

an idiom, often used with the verb of aural rather than visual perception and it refers simply to the *direct non-mediated, i.e. mediate character of a manifestation of God's presence*. It describes a person-to-person encounter without the help or hindrance of an intermediary. (Terrien, 1978:90, 91; italics – JS.)

Others, such as Moberly (1983:74), understand the term *my panîm* as "I, myself", i.e. that the emphasis is on the personal presence of

3 The expression *panîm-el-panîm* (face to face) refers to the manifestation of the Divine that is too intense for a human to experience safely. This experience of Exodus 33:20 seems to contradict the earlier face-to-face encounter that Moses had of God in the tent of meeting (Exod. 33:11). It is possible that the encounter is not literal, but denotes an experience of intimacy.

Yahweh. To seek the face of God in the Old Testament would in this case imply seeking the direct fellowship of God – to come near God, as for example, in prayer. Moses sought a direct experience with Yahweh not primarily for himself, but also for the Israelites, God's people.

The use of *panîm* is significant for the several different nuances of the word. Since the Hebrew faith had such an intense personal character, the use of the term *God's face* in divine-human encounter emphasised God's *direct, unmediated involvement*, as well as God's personal sense of presence to humanity (Moberly, 1983:74). According to Terrien (1978:65) biblical Hebrew (the language) apparently did not possess an abstract term meaning *presence*. The expression *the face of Y-H-V-H* or *the face of Elohim* was often specifically used to designate not only the presence, but also the innermost being of God. God was regarded as inaccessible – even to a person of exceptional spiritual stature (like Moses). The word *panîm* was consequently used in a metaphorical sense to designate a sense of God's immediate proximity. The expression literally carried the meaning that God "showed God-self" or "appeared" to individuals, but the paradox inherent in attempts to speak of humanity's communion with God remained unaltered.

Several Old Testament personages such as Moses, Jacob and Job claimed to have had face-to-face encounters with God. Most of them qualified the degree of directness with which they gazed into God's face (Egan, 1984:18) and how their respective circumstances determined the nature of the encounter's directness. Jacob, for example, after his wrestle with God, decided to call the place Peniel, "because I have seen God face to face and I have survived" (Gen. 32:30). Job's final answer after his severe testing was that "I know you only by hearsay but now having seen you with my own eyes ... I can retract all I have said" (Job 42:5-6). Job's honour was no longer of importance when he was ushered into the realm of the divine. The moment he spent in the glorious presence of God offered Job an all-sufficient gift: the immediacy of God Himself. Job encountered God's holiness in its fullness, without intermediary, and the entire-experience provided him with new insight into God and himself.

The face-to-face encounter of God with Moses is of deep significance in understanding not only the relationship between Moses and Y-H-V-H (Num. 12:8; Deut. 34:10), but more generally between God and humanity as a whole. Direct experiences of God in the Old Testament are characterised by the immediacy of God's presence. Individuals such as Jacob, Moses and Job were all brought closely

into immediate proximity to “the Holy” or “the Presence of God”. Human-Divine encounters occurred at the most intimate level of human consciousness in the form of a vision, a dream or a face-to-face experience.

If any person among you is a prophet I make myself known to him in a vision. I speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is at home in my house; I speak with him face-to-face plainly and not in riddles and he sees the form of Yahweh. (Num. 12:7-8.)

The presence of God, though real, remained unseen, but the intensity of feeling was accompanied by the urge to know God with a deeper certainty. This is evident from the juxtaposition of apparently conflicting statements: “And Yahweh spoke with Moses face-to-face” (Exod. 33:11); “But (Yahweh) said: ‘You cannot see my face, for a human person shall not see me and live’” (Exod. 33:26).

Yahweh spoke to Moses *panîm-el-panîm*, as a person speaks with a friend (Exod. 33:11). Moses requested God to manifest his real presence, and Yahweh was willing to reveal his splendour, but warned all the same, that there were dangers attached when He is experienced in such a direct way. He said: “You cannot see my face and live.” (Exod. 33:22.) It is precisely therein that the paradox of Jewish theology lies: that God is seen and yet not seen, known and yet unknowable, revealed but always in obscurity (Leech, 1985:162).

3. Moses's face-to-face experience of Yahweh and Jesus's direct experience of God

Eskenazi and Weiss (2008:508) point out that the word *panîm* (face) is a key term in Exodus 33, as it appears seven times. Here it signals a deeply intimate relationship between God and Moses. Moses requested a revelation and God responded and the word *panîm* is used to signal a degree of divine presence. This divine presence, *kavod*,⁴ refers to a visible manifestation of God, usually in the form of fire or cloud. “But you cannot see my face.” (Exod. 33:11.) Here, according to Eskenazi and Weiss (2008:509), *panîm* (face) refers to a manifestation of the divine that is too intense for a human to experience safely. While this seems to contradict the earlier account of Moses's experience of God “face-to-face” in the tent

4 *Kavod* is the Hebrew word for presence which refers to a visible manifestation of God, usually in the form of cloud or fire as indicated in Exodus.

of meeting (Exod. 33:11), Eskenazi and Weiss say it is not literal, but denotes intense intimacy. This radical anthropomorphism communicates a vision of God that is simultaneously dangerously transcendent and intimately protective: God's body shields Moses from God's face (*panîm*), which is portrayed as so intense that viewing it would be fatal.

The face-to-face encounter which Moses had with God was described in spatial and temporal terms. Moses's deep desire was to see the divine, to see God. This is characteristic of all forms of mysticism, but the religion of the Old Testament, says Moberly (1983), does not claim to be a mystical religion. It is nevertheless striking how the Old Testament in these or related passages resists moves towards mysticism or divinisation, by insisting on the qualitative ontological differences between God and humanity. Yet, the paradox is clear in the fact that precisely those passages which say that a human person cannot see and hear God also affirm that just such an event has indeed happened (Moberly, 1983:81). The significant features of Moses's direct experiences of Yahweh testify to his mystical encounters with the Divine and in turn were realised by Jesus.

The first important feature of Moses's experience of God was his all-pervasive desire to know God, or at least some aspect of God, and he requested a direct experience of God. When he was brought directly into the immediate presence of God he was fully aware of the experience.

- The Sinai encounter was also characterised by divine-human dialogue – a form of give and take between God and Moses, which was also evident in the burning bush experience.
- Another significant feature is that both the Sinai and the burning bush experiences of God contained an intense fear of that which is unknown, and the awe of that which is sacred. Moses experienced that fear when he entered the direct presence of God. He was afraid to look in God's face, and as a result he veiled his face and saw only the back of Yahweh. The blinding light was too much to absorb directly and consequently he saw God by partial vision (Exod. 33:22). On the other hand, the immediate impact of the divine face or countenance on Moses would have been fatal. The splendour of God was present in all its fullness and Moses, for his own sake, needed to be protected from this. So Yahweh pressed on ahead and Moses came to see the "traces left behind" – the so-called "after-glow". Moberly (1983:82) states that

the impact of this imagery in Exodus was important, as it enhanced the qualitative superiority of God over humanity. Yahweh protected Moses, while Moses enjoyed the close presence of God, but the gulf between God and humanity was clearly emphasised, as the fine divine/human balance is central and of the utmost importance to Moses's encounter with God.

- What was also meaningful in the experience was that the revelation of God provided Moses with a deeper certainty and assurance that God is *real*. Terrien (1978:140) professes that it seems evident that at the moment of Moses's encounter with God, he discerns that the only knowledge is an acquaintance with divine presence in history. The inner core of the divine reality, precisely because it is divine, forever escapes humanity's grasp. Moses in requesting to know God's ways, wishes passionately to go beyond what he has already learned.

The theological point made in Exodus 3:20 were meant for humanity as a whole. In Moses's request for a fuller revelation of God, the distance between God and humanity had to be preserved. Even Moses had to observe the limitations inherent in humanity (Moberly, 1983:81). Moses was thereafter revered as the man whom Yahweh knew face to face (Terrien, 1978:112, 113).

The following elements can be extrapolated from Moses's encounter with God:

- **Direct experiences were inextricably linked with aural and visual faculties**

Direct experiences of God recorded in the Old Testament were inextricably linked with the aural and the visual faculties of humanity; both types of direct experiences exercised a significant impact on the individual and could be equally awesome. Since Hebraism was a religion not of the eye, but of the ear (Terrien, 1978:112), the presence of God in the Old Testament was "heard", rather than "seen". In the case of Moses and the burning bush he did not see God, but he heard God's Word. The presence of God was experienced as real and so was the spoken Word. The invisibility of the God who speaks is a cardinal tenet of Hebraic theology and still is today. Sight is submitted to hearing: the eye is closed but the ear is opened (Terrien, 1978:112).

- **Direct experiences of God were characterised by the immediacy of God's presence**

Old Testament direct experiences of God can be characterised by the *immediacy of God's presence* and the bringing of the individual with *total awareness* and *willingness* into the close proximity of the Holy. The directness of the experience is brought about *without the assistance of any intermediary*, as the encounter between God and the individual is marked by the personal nature of the experience. God and the individual experience each other by the strength of the one's awareness of the other.

- **Direct experiences were often of a fleeting nature**

The direct experience of God normally took place in a few fleeting instances. The instances of awareness of the immediate encounter with the Divine Reality were not only extremely brief, but appeared to have been the privilege of an extremely restricted few (Terrien, 1978:29).

- **Direct experiences are marked by human-divine dialogue**

The experience is often marked by human-divine dialogue (as observed in the case of Moses, Jacob and Job), but throughout the dialogue an interacting tension is maintained by the awareness of the qualitative differences between God and the individual.

- **The experience is accompanied not only by intensity of feeling, but also by an urge to know God with a deeper certainty**

Throughout the experience some of God's wonders are perceived; the individual is provided with deeper insight into at least one aspect of the divine, and this in turn provides better understanding of human nature.

- **There are some transforming outcomes attached to the immediate experiences of God in the Old Testament**

Direct experiences of God, as recorded in the Old Testament, transformed figures such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and Job. In the case of Moses he was transformed from a fretful individual to a secure person. "My presence will go with you and I shall make you restful" (Exod. 33:12-14). Job, who experienced the mystery of God for himself, did not necessarily have his questions answered, but his entire understanding of God changed and that caused him to retract

all his previous statements. His experience of God had changed his perspective and his knowledge of God was firsthand. His agonising questions ceased, because he had “seen” God for himself; he had experienced something of the essence and glory of God. What he obtained involved an encounter with the unutterable, because he could not describe God directly, but only in relationship and in action. The course of Abraham’s, Jacob’s and Samuel’s lives changed after they encountered God in their respective ways.

The *transforming* power inherent in the experience leaves the individual with a more secure sense of identity and purpose of mission. The visions and ecstatic encounters of the prophets in the Old Testament often left them speechless and with God’s Word burning in their hearts. Their collective experiences form a paradigm for those who experience God as Holy, as a wondrous and fascinating mystery (Egan, 1984:18).

4. The paradox of “presence in absence”

Generally the Hebrew people seemed, however, to have understood the paradox of presence in absence, and absence in presence. They know that the hidden God was still God and, for this reason, Terrien (1978:83) says “Israel rose to a sublimity of theological perception because she understood the paradox of presence in absence”. They experienced God’s hiddenness with the same intensity as they experienced God’s presence, as both aspects formed an integral part of the understanding of God and both were of equal importance to Israel’s faith. Both types of experiences were deeply rooted in the Jewish understanding of the nature of their God and the universe. God, for the Jews, was both hidden and present, near and far away (Balentine, 1982:172), and the experience of God’s presence was thus both real and elusive. The Sinai revelation would have presupposed this understanding, hence the apparently conflicting statements regarding Moses’s face-to-face experiences of God. This dilemma which faith in Israel’s God presents, is not a “dilemma that undermines Israel’s faith, though it does stretch it to the farthest dimensions” (Balentine, 1982:172). For Israel to experience God meant not only to experience hiddenness and presence, God’s oneness with humanity and with the entire universe, but also – and this is very important – God’s otherness, God’s omnipotence, omnipresence and immanence.

From a theological perspective, it is necessary to affirm that God can be known as intimately present and simultaneously beyond all human reach and comprehension, precisely because God is under-

stood to be transcendent and immanent. This ambiguity is inherent in language about God and does not need to be resolved. What is important is not so much that this tension should be dissipated, but that it should be recognised as paradox, and be described directly, as in Exodus 33:11 (Moberly, 1983:66). Without the availability of a generally accepted definition of a direct experience of God, it is not easy to determine which characteristics to include and which to exclude for the purpose of analysis as well as for the construction of a definition. Nevertheless, it is good to look at the experiences of Jesus and how they compare with Moses and other Old Testament personages.

5. Jesus's direct experiences of God the Father

In considering the nature of Jesus's direct experience of God the Father the author is of the opinion that the Hebrew experience of God remained the preliminary stage of God's new covenant, which would give "the light of knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Jesus Christ, who is the true likeness of God, made it possible for humanity to gaze at the face of God and live. Jesus told his disciples that in the Old Testament "many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see and did not and hear what you hear and did not hear it" (Matt. 13:17). Significantly, during the mission of Christ on earth, the imagery of seeing God was frequently used, and the responsibility was placed upon the disciples to interpret Jesus asking: "Having eyes do you not see yet?"; and "Blessed are the eyes that see the things you see." (Luke 10:23-24.) Jesus, as the Son of God and the revelation of the Father, brought the Good News that all who receive Him receive the Father and become the children of God.

There is a certain elusiveness about Jesus's private experiences of God. Dunn (1975), who has done excellent research into this topic and from which much that follows is drawn, suggested that one way to determine Jesus's experiences of God is to look at what *in* Jesus's own experiences referred to God (Dunn, 1975:11). The nature of the intimate relationship of Jesus to his Father was expressed by Jesus when He said: "No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God. He has seen the Father." (John 14:10.) The fact that Jesus claimed to know the Father, in the biblical sense of the word, means that He had direct experiential knowledge of God as his Father. Dunn continues by stating that the knowledge which the Father had of the Son and the Son of the Father was direct and intuitive, one abiding in the other, having

direct experiences of the other. This loving interchange, the unique knowledge Jesus had of God, He wished to share with those close to Him (Matt. 11:27). However, Jesus, by His direct encounters with the Father at his baptism, his transfiguration, and when praying, not only continued with the Old Testament tradition, but transcended the Jewish *milieu*. His intimate firsthand experiences of the Father and the Holy Spirit permeated everything He did and was (Dunn, 1975:90), and this stemmed from the unique relationship that Jesus shared with the Father.

6. Unique ingredients in Jesus's immediate or direct experiences of God the Father

The Hebrews's understanding of God in the Old Testament did not in particular shape Jesus's experiences of God, since Jesus operated out of "a consciousness of His own Sonship, His own Authority, His own Mission and Power, which seemed to have transcended that of ordinary prophetic experiences in the Old Testament" (Dunn, 1975: 91, 92). While this may be so, Jesus would have been aware of the reticence of the Jewish people to claim direct experiences of God, but judging from Gospel evidences, Jesus's growing awareness of his identity as the Son of God and his unique sense of God-consciousness, would have brought Him into a different experience of God the Father.

• Jesus's quality of God-consciousness

Although Jesus in his human form was like all people, it is argued that his uniqueness was captured in the quality of his experiences of God, as his experiences of God were marked by his exceptional quality of God-consciousness (Dunn, 1975:12). This sense of God-consciousness not only distinguished Him from others, but empowered Him and was basic to his mission.

• The distinctiveness of his own Abba relationship

Dunn (1975) points out that at certain times in Jesus's life, such as at his baptism or when He prayed, it is possible to see fairly deeply into Jesus's experiences of God, for they provide insight into how He conceived of his relation with God. The Abba prayer, in which Jesus expressed an unusual and unprecedented sense of intimacy with God by using the term *Abba*, enables us to see into the heart of Jesus's relationship with God, as perceived by Him. In this particular experience Jesus experienced God's love and authority in a direct manner. He also had direct experiences of God in moments of

naked loneliness, and in such times the only language that could give expression to the unusual intimacy was that of a child to his Father. Similar to Moses and Elijah who spent long hours in prayer, so too did Jesus. Borg (2005:308) claimed that there was a mystical dimension to his prayer and he maintains that Jesus would have been familiar with the *merkabah* mysticism of his time and before. This most distinctive feature of Jesus's prayer life and the use of the word *Abba* to address his Father were certainly breaking with tradition and this can only be ascribed to the intensity of his spiritual experience.

- **The immediate experiences of God as providing Jesus with a sense of his own identity**

Jesus's direct experience of God as Father was real, loving and compelling, and in the experience He came to know Himself as the Son of God. Dunn (1975:358) states: "Jesus experienced his Sonship in a direct and unmediated way." The direct experience of God enhanced not only his consciousness of Sonship, but also his consciousness of God. The experiences of God as Father occurred only in relation to his own consciousness of Sonship and it is also in prayer that Jesus was most conscious of God's care and authority as Father (Dunn, 1975:24).

- **Direct experiences provided Jesus with insight into the Father's will and with understanding of his own mission**

Jesus's awareness and experience of God crystallised at his baptism by John. What Jesus experienced there, was a relationship between Himself and God, between Father and Son, and with this experience He received deep confirmation of his own Personhood and the Will of God. The experience also provided Jesus with understanding of his mission and his consciousness of the Spirit. He was "conscious of a direct and unmediated authority, a transcendent authority which set him above party and even the law" (Dunn, 1975: 77). The experience provided a powerful certainty of a direct and unmediated kind, a certainty that He knew God's will, which set Him apart from other people of comparable significance in the history of religions (Dunn, 1975:79).

- **The direct experiences Jesus had of God the Father were Spirit-filled**

As reflected by Borg (2005:305), the Spirit-filled experiences of Jesus at his baptism, the "heavenly voice" declared Jesus's identity to Him as the "Beloved Son". Borg asserts that this experience

placed Jesus in the Spirit-filled heart of Judaism and this intense experience of the Spirit of God initiated Jesus into his ministry. The messianic consciousness of Jesus is an awareness that forms part of his Self for self-identity and self-awareness. The distinctive relationship of Jesus to God, whom He addresses as “Father” forms part of a distinctive revelation of his vocation of Sonship. This is declared by the heavenly voice at his baptism, tested in the wilderness temptations, reiterated at the transfiguration, and summed up the close of his public teaching (Robinson, 2005:558). Jesus’s direct experiences of the Father which was experiences of intimate union with God as Father, are also experiences of being loved and known by the Father; as said by Robinson: Jesus is the Son of God’s love.

For Jesus then, direct experiences of God were distinctive experiences of God as Father. His direct experiences were the deep wells out of which flowed his sense of mission, his authority, his gospel and his life-style (Dunn, 1975:357). Jesus’s experiences of God, which came to be expressed in the Gospels, became determinative for later Christian experiences. The disciples also underwent profound spiritual transformations when they in turn experienced Jesus directly, both during his life on earth and after his resurrection.

7. Jesus – the subject and object of direct experiences of God

Christianity has its roots in the resurrection experiences, when many Christians claimed that Jesus appeared to them. The day to day experiences the disciples had of the earthly Jesus were of a different nature to that which Paul had of the risen Christ. Paul’s dramatic encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:3-8; Gal. 11:12; 1 Cor. 9:1) is questioned by many scholars as to whether it was a literal experience, or was what he saw a perception of the *mind* rather than the eye? It is, however, significant that in Paul’s direct experience of the risen Christ there was also a strong aural component coupled with important dialogue, as was the case of Moses at the burning bush and Jesus at his baptism by John. Both the seeing and the hearing experiences had profound repercussions for Paul and his life in the future. Whether Paul’s experience was a mental perception, a physical perception or a visionary perception (Dunn, 1975:104), it was an experience that convinced him that he had experienced “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (Dunn, 1975:109).

This direct experience of God in the face of Jesus Christ determined Paul's discipleship and literally transformed his life. As far as Paul was concerned, he ascribed his authority as an apostle to the direct experience of Jesus. He professed the direct encounter with Jesus to be the first and final authority for the eschatological compulsion, which moulded his life as apostle and mouthpiece. Dunn (1975:113) claims that once Paul had yielded to this experience, it became a source of compulsion and inner grace from which his sense of mission immediately sprang. This was not unlike the encounter Jesus and Moses had of God. All three of them were endowed with the compelling conviction of their mission after their respective encounters with God. It was a once in a life time experience, uniquely different in qualification from all subsequent experiences of God as Father and Holy Spirit.

Since a human person (according to the Hebrew tradition), could not see the face of God without having to face death, this concept of a *direct* experience of God came to form part of an eschatological reality. The deep intuition of seeing the face of God, the synonym of experiencing God directly, came to be regarded as a privilege reserved for the moment of death and the life hereafter. The tradition was carried into the New Testament where the metaphor of experiencing God face to face was reluctantly used as far as human experience is concerned. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament teaches that the human person cannot see God and live and further distinguishes between two phases in the economy of salvation. The distinction is made by the antithesis between *now* and *then*. Both the Old and New Testaments adhere to a twofold claim that it is possible and impossible to see and know God directly.

The experiences of the first Christians became more complicated as they claimed experience of Jesus and the Spirit. Where Jesus had been the subject of direct experience of God, He became the object of religious experiences. The early Christians believed that God was supremely revealed in the person of Jesus, that Jesus was, in fact, God made flesh. Jesus himself said: "the Father and I are one. If you knew me you would know my Father as well" (John 8:19). Paul expected the Christians to have relatively easy access to an experience of God. "All of us with faces unveiled, while reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured in the same image from glory to glory, by the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Cor. 3:8.) In this instance as well as others, Paul departed from the Hebraic reticence about seeing God directly, since he affirmed that Christians were able to "behold the glory of God". The Israelites, he

said, were blinded by the veil over their faces and at the moment of conversion the veil falls from their faces and they enter a live relation of intimacy with God and God is seen under the image of Jesus (Terrien, 1978:457). To take away the veil implies that the person has no choice but to look at the face of God and to experience God's Holy Presence (Shannon, 1981:14).

Paul also claimed that it is only by direct vision that we will obtain perfect knowledge of God, as all knowledge by faith is regarded as imperfect. This knowledge is an anticipation of the future knowledge we shall obtain when we see God literally face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). During this present life, he says, the Christian knows God partially, obscurely, as in a mirror. Later, when the person is an adult in the faith, he/she will know God as God knows him/her. Paul here contrasts the obscure, indirect vision in the mirror with the clear vision that will occur when the knower is face to face with God. At present humanity is busy seeking the face of God indirectly through God's created manifestations as in a mirror. How this differs from the direct face-to-face vision through no created medium can be emphasised by looking at 1 Corinthians 13:12 and the intimacy of Moses with God in Exodus 33:11. In this case 1 Corinthians 13:12 can mean the clear intuitive vision of the divine essence. It is made clear by Paul that only *agape* (real love) leads to a direct experience of God. This type of love never fails, so that in the end only life and a direct vision of God remain and are of ultimate significance. Paul insists that all Christians can experience God directly in the Spirit, as Christianity is essentially a religion of the Spirit rather than the law. Under the Old Covenant only Moses had direct access to the divine presence of God, but in Christianity an experience of the living God is a reality open to all. A direct experience for the Christian arises out of a living relationship with God and the experience deepens that relationship existentially (Dunn, 1975:257).

8. Human access to an immediate experience of God

Despite the fact that, according to the Israelites, it was axiomatic that no one could see the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20), the Bible seems to suggest that at least some humans had a fleeting and tenuous experience of the Divine (Dulles quoted in Edwards, 1984:x). The New Testament asserts that God came among us – visibly in Jesus Christ and invisibly in the Holy Spirit. The apostles were convinced that in Jesus they had experienced the Word of Life (1 John 1:1). Yet, according to 1 Timothy 6:16, God continues to dwell in inaccessible light. To build a contemporary theological ap-

proach to human experiences of God, based on the Abba experiences of Jesus Christ, depends on how we perceive the human being in relation to the Divine. While some mystics claim that human beings can have a direct, unmediated experience of God, this needs qualification. God is not an object in this world, but a reality that transcends all actual and possible objects, including every human who knows (Dulles quoted in Edwards, 1984:ix). In contending for the human experience of God, it is important to ascertain what the possible God-given dynamism of the human spirit towards God could be. Would that enable a direct experience of God to occur?

8.1 The human inclination towards a direct experience of God

An understanding of the human person as a composite of the spiritual and the corporeal, the angelic and the earthly (Neuer & Dupius, 1998:168, art. 412), would imply that an experience of God would consider the entire synthesis of the human person. If the human being is perceived as the starting point of a direct experience of God, then knowledge of both God and humans would be prerequisites. Rahner (1989:44) maintains that the human being, insofar as he/she accepts his/her own transcendence, admits it into his/her consciousness and by reflection objectifies what is already in his/her transcendentality, knows explicitly what is meant by God and hence an experience of God. However, the all important question still prevails: How does the human being connect with the Divine in a direct experience of God?

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century Dominican, as reflected by Kelly (1992:88), points out that God is transcendent and timeless, and all individual beings (in particular human beings) are contingent images of God, the Divine Self. In comparison to human beings God is considered as "Pure Spirit" or "Infinite Personality". Spirit in this context is not spirit as opposed to matter. *Pure Spirit* transcends all real distinction and individualisation and hence it is identical to God. This is so, because in God there is no real distinction or "otherness", says Kelly (1992:95). If the human being is to participate in the Divine Self that is also Pure Spirit, it is surmised that it should possess similar attributes to that of God. Since the human being is a composition of spirituality and materiality, while it exists in time and born in time, he/she can transcend the limits of time and hence is supra-temporal. When the human being is wholly absorbed in the Divine Self, "it proceeds from eternity" and he/she is open for a direct experience of God. According to this insight, the self has a

prior existence in the transcendent and ultimate “Divine Selfhood”, where there is no temporality or individuality (Kelly, 1992:66). Rahner (1989:40) calls this the *posterior knowledge* which the human possesses of God. Kelly (1992:96), following Meister Eckhart, affirms that the self, also known as the spiritual self, proceeds from eternity. It is a reflection or image of its object, namely the Divine Self. The spiritual self and the Divine Self are, like fire and heat, bound up with one another. They could be thought of separately, but they cannot be separated. Being separated from God, from whom the human person derives all reality, amounts to meaninglessness and nothingness.

The human being, by means of direct participation in the Divine Self, becomes a participant in the existence of the Divine Self and takes on its characteristics. According to Fox (1980:75) commenting on Meister Eckhart, that which is in God is God, the self that is in the Divine Self, is divine selfhood. This article therefore postulates that human self-realisation benefits by a person’s direct participation in the existence of God. To this end Rahner (1996:35) holds the view that the human person possesses an intrinsic openness to transcendence and unfathomable mystery, to the boundless and the infinite.

8.2 The transcendental mystical self in direct experience of God

Christian mystics such as Eckhart, Ruusbroec and Catherine of Genoa, promote the concept of the transcendental mystical self, the self that is experienced in a direct experience of God – in prayerful union with God. Catherine of Genoa could assert: “My me is God” or “My being is God” (Wiseman, 1990:233). The direct experience of God constitutes a claim of the personal identity of the self with God. The Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec (1995:46) claims that in true contemplation the person’s direct experience of God “is to be God with God, without intermediary or any element of otherness”. For Van Ruusbroec the experience of contemplative love is characterised by a union so intimate that there seems to be no longer any distinction between self and God.

In reference to this autotheistic imparting of the self, Gaylin (1986: 100) explains that one of the capacities essential to human love is that of fusion; that is creating a fused identity by merging the self with that of another person. This is not dissimilar to the psychological observation of Freud (1955:21, 64-65) who said that at the height of being in love the boundary between the self and the other

disappears. Commenting on the question of the fusion of the “human self” with the “self of God”, Thomas Aquinas (1981:1-2 q, 112 a.1) maintains that theologically speaking, the fusion in no way nullifies the ontological distinction between creature and Creator. He says the human person shares in God’s nature only by participation.

While the mystics claim that the self is realised in the experience of mystical union with God (a direct experience of God), Rahner (1975:122-132) who believes in the mysticism of everyday, argues that this is a fundamental experience of the self and of God. In terms of Rahner’s metaphysical anthropology, we do not have to acquire the fundamental experience of the self and of the transcendent, for it is an inbuilt capacity. The “original and ultimate experience of God constitutes the enabling condition of, and an intrinsic element in, the experience of self in such a way that without this experience of God no experience of the self is possible” (Rahner, 1975:125). According to Teresa of Avila, the deeper self is at its heart in contact with God, and Dupré (1981:124) points out that it is important for the Christian that the self (the human person) is understood to be the point of contact with the divine.

If divinity is regarded as the true identity of the human being, then this constitutes the innate capacity of every person that permits access to God – in other words for every person to have a direct experience of God. Forman (1990:216) claims that the transformation of the self and the mystical experience are in fact alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon. The individual’s call to mystery is found in the spirit of transcendence, which is common to every person. This transcending spirit is open to the grace of Supreme Being, whose will is that all people are to experience salvation, which is to have direct experience of God. In this regard a direct experience of God’s love can be identified as an essential element of a direct experience of God. Love is the single most common factor among all the various descriptions of a direct experience of God: direct experience of God as an experience of union in love, a loving immersion in God.

9. Concluding remarks

Moses had to act as the intermediary between God and the Israelites: “You speak to us and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die.” (Exod. 20:18-19.) This is similar to the Christians who came to prefer the mediation of the church instead of any kind of direct experience of God. To see God is to be in heaven; to be on earth came to mean not seeing God, not experiencing God

directly. While the New Testament remained faithful to the teachings of the Old Testament, Jesus brought a different dimension to the concept of seeing God face to face. But while we are on this side of the eschatological divide, “The servants of God will not see God’s face until they are in the New Jerusalem.” (Rev. 22:4.) The direct experience of God as a future event appears as a strong motif in the New Testament, as was the case in the Old Testament. The concept of beatific vision, to see God when a radically new creation has been created, formed a strong association with the eschatological understanding of an immediate experience of God.

What we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed, all we know is that when it is revealed we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is. ... Now we know by faith, but then we shall know by vision. (1 John 3:2.)

Paradoxically, Scripture speaks of God who can be directly experienced while remaining hidden, yet no one can see God’s brilliance and live (Exod. 33:20). In the New Testament the direct experience of God is mediated through the person of Jesus Christ: no one has seen God except the Son who has made God known (John 1:18; 6:36). To have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father (John 14:9). The uniqueness of Jesus’s direct experience of the Father derives from his pre-existing relation to the Father. Instances in Jesus’s life where the glory of God was experientially revealed, such as at his baptism, the transfiguration, and above all at the resurrection, still stand in secure Gospel evidence of Jesus’s direct interactive encounters with his Father.

Paul claims that only *agape* (real love) leads to a direct experience of God (1 Cor. 13:12). According to him this type of love never fails, so that in the end only love and a direct vision of God remain of ultimate meaning. In the effort to construct a working definition of a direct experience of God it appears that the most singled out characteristic that furnishes the essence of such an experience is love. To understand the experience of God as an experience of love between God and the human being is what mystics describe as an experience of “loving union” – as “being God with God” (the saying of Van Ruusbroec). It is a very daring statement to make, says Rahner, but he admits that one can only talk about it if one has had such an experience (Rahner, 1967:86, 89). The direct experience is unmediated. When the experience is free of all influences of ideas, concepts, words, philosophies and religious traditions, such an experience is direct without intermediaries (King, 1988:276). The directness of God’s presence and the person’s awareness of God’s

immediacy render any form of intermediary insignificant and functionless.

Human unworthiness, the prominent biblical theme that functions as a restraining factor in claiming direct experience of God, is contrasted by the theological anthropological appeal to the divine element in humanity as a credible basis to experience God directly. Human nature, created in God's image and likeness, shares in God's nature and thus has the inner capacity to experience God directly. Rahner presented the human being as spirit in the world, destined to experience God because it has the transcendence in its constitution. According to Moltmann (1988:67) the perception modern people have of themselves in relation to God is the result of an "anthropocentric shift" from the ancient cosmocentric world of Plato, where people understood themselves as part of the divine cosmos of the natural order. This shift implies moving to a world where nature was de-divinised, secularised and made the material of the human will. In the light of the anthropocentric shift the human person is perceived as sharing in God's nature. To be truly human, says Moltmann (1988:67), implies sharing in the image and likeness of God and human self-transcendence. This is not only a part of human nature but also makes direct experience of God a universal experience.

Given the scale of the challenge of what "an immediate or direct experience of God" means in relation to the human person, it is good to know that human beings experiences reality in at least four combinations, namely physically, functionally, spiritually and aesthetically. Heidegger (1962:185) insisted that to be human means primarily to be open to transcendence. His criterion for humanness is openness to being. To become a full human means exercising the potentiality of transcendence and direct experiences of God forms part of the realisation of both *ontological* and *ontic* potentialities. Transcendence is an empty abstraction if it is not seen in opposition to the confining influence of one's conditions of heredity and environment. Since transcendence provides the capacity to experience being, the human person is not merely a construct but an actual ontological presence, a *presencing of Being*, which has the capacity to have an immediate experience of the Divine. Consequently for the human person to become directly aware of the realm of Being, it must have direct experience of its own nature. The impetus towards a direct experience of the Divine is present in all human beings, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, and in this context Jesus was no exception. In the biblical and theological exploration of

Jesus and the human being created in the image of God, Jesus remains the foundation and symbol of the human being, capable of experiencing God directly.

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Key concepts:

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Kernbegrippe:

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onmiddellike/direkte ervaring van God
panîm-el-panîm (aangesig-tot-aangesig)
transiente werklikheid
transformasie