

THE INDWELLING OF GOD AMONG MANKIND: THE SHEKHINA

The word Shekhina is not used in the Bible, but the idea of the Shekhina is present everywhere in the Old Testament and in the New Testament: that God dwells among us and is with us in his glory. The word "Shekinah" comes from the verb "shakhan" (Hebrew: "stay", "reside" and "indwell" as well). The term "shakhan" is widespread in the Old Testament and also in the Greek New Testament.

Some scholars believe that the word originally comes from the Chaldean language, but was taken fairly early into the Hebrew language. It can already be found in the Jerusalem-Targum, therefore quite early. Later, this word – Shekhina – was used in the Jewish custom for Elohim. You know that we use as Jews for the word "God", the name "God Elohim". Because we believe that this word is so high and so holy that it is inappropriate to say it out loud. Therefore we use other words for the Lord. A word we use is the "Shekhina". With this word we want to say "God". But God is so high and gloriously shining, that his name is not allowed to be expressed.

With this word, you understand God from the standpoint of his female characteristics. If one uses that word,

you think not only of the glory of the Lord, but also of his feminine characteristics.

In Jewish theology the Shekhina is often associated with prophecy. This is interesting for us as Christians, isn't it? We are not surprised. In John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 14 we read that the Incarnate Word dwells among us. The word has thus become flesh and dwelt among us. The word is the Shekhina, because the word lives in us and is with us. That does not surprise us, when we consider the background of this fact that the Shekhina is often associated with prophecy. And the word and prophecy go together hand in hand.

The Greek word also has the Old Testament "shakhan" in its background, "to live". But the Shekhina comes to us not only with the prophecy, but also, as we have already heard this morning, in human form. It is interesting what Ida Glaser has told us. She took it for granted that the three people who had been with Abraham, were angels. This is what Jewish, Muslim and Christian commentaries say. All three claim that these three men were angels. But the Bible does not explicitly say so. It is quite possible

that they were. But the Bible does not tell us that! The Bible says that they were humnas or males.

The Shekhina comes to us also in human form. This is interesting to know for us as Christians. The word has become a human! And there is a parallel with Islam here. The word, the Eternal Word, in Islam is (supposedly) the Qur'an. And the Qur'an was (supposedly) always together forever with God in heaven. Then, at a point in history, the Qur'an was (allegedly) brought down to us, as the word was brought in John's Gospel also at a point in history to us.

But there is a big difference! The one word in Islam has become a book. The other word in John's Gospel has become a man. But the two were forever with God. We could also say in Islam, at the very beginning was the word: the Qur'an. And the Qur'an was with God, but the Qur'an was not God. Then the word came down and has become a common - no, not common! - (allegedly) has become a holy book.

We try to explain how God the Father is the only eternal one. But Jesus is also eternal, for the second person of the Trinity is eternal, too. Nevertheless, this eternal person is of God. But only the father is (eternal), nevertheless also the Son is eternal. And that gives us problems in our theology. And the Muslims have the same problems, and even (much) more, because the word, the Qur'an, (allegedly) was also eternal. Eternal, but nonetheless the word comes from God. But God was alone the

first, and afterwards came the word. Nevertheless, the word, the Qur'an is (allegedly) eternal. It's difficult. But for us (Christians), it is somewhat easier because the word for us has always been God.

The word, the Shekhina comes to us in various forms: as a word, as a prophecy, as people, even as angels - Cherubim and Seraphim. We do know, of course, what the Seraphim were. They come from the Hebrew word "saraph", and that means "to burn". The Seraphim in Isaiah, chapter 6, were "the Burning ones". We can say that they were holy, heavenly fireworks, in the temple there in Isaiah. But the Shekhina comes in these different forms to us. I would like to remind us that the Shekhina comes to us in human form. Of course, we believe that Jesus is the Shekhina: God with us, Immanuel. We'll get back to it.

In the Old Testament, it is remarkable that the highest God dwells among his people and that he came to his people. That is already an early sign of the Trinity (of God). Without the Trinity, it is almost impossible to keep the high and entirely holy God together with the current, present Lord. Either God is above, far away, quite away from us, the weak, sinful men, or he is close to us.

This can be seen in Islam. Among ordinary Muslims, it is impossible to have a close relationship with God, with Allah. You cannot get to know him. He should be praised and exalted, and you shall be subjected and obedient to him. But knowing

him in a close, personal relationship with him is impossible. Because God is so high and we are only small, weak humans. And there you can see a difference between the Christian and Islamic faith. For us as Christians, it is the sin that separates us from God. Because God is so holy that we as sinners cannot come together with him. But in Islam it is not a question of sin, but a question of God's greatness: that he is so high, so big, so powerful, so strong, the Most High, while we are weak, little humans. For us, it is quite impossible to get to know him in Islam.

However, when you are together with the mystical Muslims, with the "Sufis", then you see that God is with them, very close to them, very visible and accessible. You can have a relationship with this Lord if one is Sufi. But they (then) lost the greatness of God and that He is so perfectly holy. You do not find this with the Sufis. So it is almost impossible to keep these two sides together: that God is completely holy and great and high, but nevertheless stays with us and lives with us.

It is of course true that God is so glorious. We say that the Lord is wonderful! What does this say? What does the word "glorious" mean? It means "like the Lord", right? And to say that the Lord is like the Lord, is obvious. But it says much, because God is so indescribable.

Like Paul says in Colossians, chapter 1, verse 15: **God is invisible**. One can not look at this holy God. To have a relationship with him is impossible.

To get to know him is impossible. He is so holy and that says the Old Testament, right? No one can see God and yet live. Because he is much brighter than the sun! And if you look at the sun with open eyes, then you will be blind! And if you look at God, who is even more brilliant than the sun, then that's totally impossible! He is so sublime, so beautiful!

We come back to the word that the Lord is glorious! It says that he is indescribable, so wonderful. We can use a number of adjectives, if we try to describe God! But he is indescribable! Man is lost in these words. This can also be found in prayer, right? And in praise. We need the same words again and again. We try to uphold the name of the Lord. But our words are missing! And ultimately we can only be silent.

Habakkuk says: **God dwells in his holy temple**. Therefore humanity should be silent. When you meet God, we can say nothing more. Thank God that he is not physically with us. If he were physically here, we would all stay quiet. But he is here! In his Holy Spirit. He stands next to me here. And he is sitting next to you. He is here.

And yet we are to use words. So we must always keep these two sides together and somehow overcome this tension, that God is so high, so holy, so fantastic, that he is glorious! But still, this magnificent Lord is with us, in our midst. Then, as the New Testament say, he is not only with us, in our midst, not only here but also *in* us, through his Holy Spirit.

But to keep these two together is not so simple.

And we know it in our churches, right? In some churches, the praise, the worship, is high and beautiful. And if it is a very old-fashioned church, then the priest will show us his back, because God is up there. But we know that God is not sitting on a table, for God is *within* us. So when the priest prays, he should turn toward us, because God is here.

The Old Testament emphasizes that the holy God dwells in the temple in Jerusalem. As with King David: He also thought - and many people think this way - that God should live in a house, that he lives in a building. But it is not so. God is everywhere. And before the temple was built, it was first believed that God dwelt in the ark. And then, in the 1st Book of Kings, we read how God has had a house built for himself. It is interesting to read some of these texts. In Exodus, chapter 25, verse 21-22 we read:

Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law that I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

So God is there in the dark, and then in the temple, and he speaks from the temple or before, from the ark. And in 1 Kings, chapter 8, verse 6ff:

The priests then brought the ark

of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. These poles were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt. When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.

At that time Solomon said:

Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."

In the ark and then in the temple God has dwelt. But really, was it not so? This is so much shaped in a human way. But God allows it and commands it too! But in fact God is everywhere in the whole world, around the world.

It is strange that we find the word "shakan", the Shekhina, in the Qur'an. And here you can see the influence of the Jews on the Qur'an.

Most Muslims would not admit that the Qur'an has been influenced by Jews. But the word "shakan" occurs six times in the Qur'an and is taken from the Bible. For example, in Sura 2:248, where it is written that the ark of our Lord comes to us with the peace of his comfort. In this verse of the Qur'an, the Shekhina is the fact that God is present "with us". It is connected with peace, with comfort. And in the Qur'an, chapter 48, verse 4, we read that the presence of God is sent to us from above: from above, from the Lord from heaven. And in the Qur'an 16:80, his presence is as in the Old Testament, in the context of the wandering of his people. Wherever they set up the camp, there is his presence. This reminds us of Exodus, chapter 13, verse 21, where the pillar of cloud by day was in Israel or before Israel: the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. God was with his people during the wandering.

At that time it was quite common that the pagan kings, the Canaanite and Moabite kings among the surrounding nations, were leading their people by day from the front. But then at night for safety reasons, they were always in the very midst of their people. Therefore, Martin Buber, in his book about the kingdom of God, "The heavenly kingdom", has written that we have the image of the kingdom of God here, because God is marching during the day *before* his people, and at night in the *midst* of his people, just like the kings of other nations: the rule of God, the kingdom of God; the glorious God with his people. But before that the

Shekhina was already present.

The glory of God covered Mount Sinai, when Israel came out of Egypt. And the glory of the Lord dwelled on the mountain. So that's usual everywhere in the Bible. And in the Old Testament it is often the case that God is present among his people. But the whole Bible through and through, is full of God's presence. This is quite common in the Bible.

Already at the beginning, in Genesis, in the creation story, the Lord acts directly without intermediaries with Adam and Eve. And then Genesis, chapter 3 verse 8, tells us that the Lord walked in the garden at the breeze of the evening wind. He was together with them, holding hands, walking in the garden. This is the Shekhina, at the very beginning. For those of us who have been in a tropical climate, it is a very beautiful picture: in the cool air of the evening, to walk at the end of a hot day. That's a special treat indeed. God has enjoyed to walk in the garden in the cool of the evening. And we should remember that even God himself had this custom to have, together with Adam and Eve, a little walk in the garden in the cool of the evening. That is already the Shekhina, God with us.

So we have seen that the Shekhina had dwelled with Israel already on the mountain during the wandering in the wilderness and that God resided in the ark, and then in the first Temple, between the cherubim. Then we read in the prophet Haggai, Chapter 3 that God wanted to fill the second Temple with his glory. It is

so amazing. God mentions that the glory of the 2nd Temple will be still larger than in the 1st Temple. In fact, we wonder, what then happened with the second Temple? Was the glory of God present or not?

The prophet Ezekiel had already described how the glory of the Lord was in the center of the Temple, but then, because of the sin of Israel, the glory of God withdrew to the entrance of the temple. Terrible, awful, that God withdrew his own glory. That is already the verdict. But it means, the temple becomes something quite useless, a mere building, without the Shekhina, without God's presence.

The Christian historian Eusebius said that the Shekhina has left the Temple in 66 AD and has moved to the Mount of Olives. But Lamentations of Jeremiah, chapter 2, verse 11 says that the Shekhina will come back when Israel repents. It is also written in Malachi, chapter 3, verse 7 where God has promised: "Turn to me, so I will return to you." If we repent, we will experience the presence, the glory of the Lord. And we remember that John the Baptist preached it this way: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And Jesus himself has used the same words, right?

Here we see a difference between the New Testament, the rabbinic faith and Islamic faith. In the New Testament the kingdom of heaven implements the will of God, by His grace. Therefore, righteousness is an inevitable challenge of the coming of the kingdom, because you

can not have the kingdom of heaven without righteousness. The Jews and the Muslims say that righteousness comes first, and then the kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist and Jesus say, no, it's the other way around. The kingdom of heaven comes first, and then comes repentance, and after repentance comes righteousness. Nevertheless, the two are always together: the kingdom, the presence of the Lord and the glory of the Lord among us together with righteousness.

We have already seen that the glory of God comes to man in Jesus Christ, John 1, verse 14. It is in the context that Jesus is valid for the whole world. And the word "world", "the world", is repeated four times in this text. That Jesus comes to the world! And that the world was made by him, and so on. The world, the world, the world, the world - four times. And it is in the context of creation. What has God made? The heavens and the earth. And the earth in Hebrew is EREZ. And EREZ, how is it used? EREZ Israel. We have two words: the earth and the land. In Hebrew, both are EREZ.

But John does not say this. Because the Shekhina is international; it is for all people, not only for Israel. And so he changed the word that was used in Genesis. And he shows that he has not done this randomly. And how does he say it? He repeats this word: the world, not the earth! Does he say, then, that the word has become a Jew of the 1st century? No, he does not say! The Word became flesh, and flesh is international. Flesh is common to all and for

all. The other word which John emphasizes in this text is the word "all": everyone, the world, that is, all flesh, internationally, everywhere in the world. And the Shekhina is not just for Israel but for all people, everywhere in the world.

The Shekhina is God. This high God is with us. We immediately think of the word Immanuel, right? This is a very strange word, a very strange title for Jesus, Immanuel. If you have not read Isaiah, and if you were not so accustomed, that Jesus is Immanuel. Each year at Christmas we celebrate that word! We are very accustomed to it. But it's an amazing word, an amazing name. You would have never expected. One would have thought that Jesus would have been Immanu-Yahweh: the covenant name, the loving, and the merciful name with us: Yahweh with us. This would have been expected. In John's Gospel we find that, too. "I am" this and that. I am the way, the truth, the life. I am the good shepherd. I am the bread of life, etc. I am Yahweh. Yahweh is with us in Jesus Christ. But that is not in the title "Immanuel". One might have expected that Jesus would be Immanu-Elohim. The Creator God who is found in the first chapters of Genesis, Elohim. And he is also, of course! But Immanu-El, this is strange, isn't it? Who was he? He was the creator God of all the Canaanite peoples, of the - and I use the word in the right way - pagans. That was the pagan god. But Israel has taken over this title "El". It was Melchizedek who brought that name to Israel: "El", the Most High! The unknowable, the ineffable, the invisible, according to Paul, in Colossians again, it is the one

who is with us, the "El". If you work among Muslims, and I've been doing this for 40 years, I often say: "Jesus is Emmanu-Allah." Allah with us! The unknown high god of the Arabs, of Islam is now knowable! We can find a relationship with the high God through Jesus Christ. The indescribable one can now be described. The Un-knowable is now knowable! The invisible one we have already seen in Jesus Christ. Wonderful, isn't it? This is good news for a Muslim that you may have a close, personal relationship, a communion, a loving communion with the high God. Wonderful! This is really good news! Immanuel.

But the title "Immanuel" can also be terrible. For us as believers it is a promise, but for those who are disobedient, who do not believe in Jesus, for them this title or this fact that God is with us, is no promise. This is already a threat! And so it was with Isaiah. The King Ahaz was told by the prophet Isaiah that he should look for a sign. But he said: "No, I will not!" That's why he was disobedient, not submitting to the word of God. And that's why God told him through Isaiah: "Immanuel". God will be with us. And if you disobey in disbelief, and without faith, then God's presence is a threat. But if you love the Lord, then it is a wonderful promise, and not just a promise but a fact. The German translation of this title is excellent: "God with us". He was God.

Before the Christian faith came to Germany, who was the God of the pagan Germans? He (GOTT) was the high creator of the pagan Germans, before the good news came to us.

Then the Christian faith has taken over this title here in Germany and brought it into the German Bible. God (GOTT), the unknowable, invisible, indescribable God is with us now. The Shekhina is with us, no longer in a temple built with human hands. It is not only *with* us, but by the Holy Spirit also *in* us. We no longer need a temple. It is nonsense, a stupidity when Christians say that the Temple should be rebuilt. We do not need this at all, because God is with us spiritually, even in this room. We do not need a temple because God is in us, even today, the real Shekhina: God with us.

In rabbinic writings the Shekhina belongs together with the Torah, with the covenant, with the Holy Spirit and with the resurrection of the dead. This is remarkable in the rabbinic writings, and so it is with us. In the New Testament the presence of God belongs together with the Word of God, with the promises of God, with the covenant. It also goes together with the Holy Spirit and with the resurrection of Jesus. Through the resurrection we have the new life, where God will always remain with us. He is eternally with us until eternity. This is the good news of the resurrection of Jesus: God with us - the Shekhina. Amen!

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And it came to pass,
when the priests
were come out of
the holy place,
that the cloud
filled the house
of the LORD,
so that the priests
could not stand
to minister
because of the cloud:
*for the glory
of the LORD
had filled the house
of the LORD.*

1 Kings 8:10-11