

THE DESIRE TO SEE GOD: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE BHAGAVADGITA AND THE BOOK OF EXODUS

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The theme of our joint conference, “experience and expression of the Divine”, contains at once a *high aim* and an intrinsic danger: is it possible to “experience” God in some way? Does this undertaking not recall the fate of *Icarus*? He wishes to approach the sun, but as he comes too close to it, his wings melt, causing him to fall into the sea and die.

To be able to “express” something *presupposes* “experience”. Therefore, in order that our meeting may have some sense at all, there must have been some experience of the Divine; otherwise it would not be possible to talk about it. It may also be that our conference represents a special opportunity, bringing together people from different backgrounds, Indian and European, to a “cross-cultural encounter”. Maybe, it is exactly this diversity that will allow us to grasp more precisely, and beyond cultural limitations, what transcends human, historical, national experiences, and thus touch on what is really Divine and proper to it.

My approach will first deal with the Old Testament background for “experience of the Divine” and then concentrate on two masterpieces of religious literature, namely the Bhagavad-gita, especially chapter 11, and the Book of Exodus. Both of them coincide in a *rare motif*, that is the desire to see God as he is, expressed by the respective main figures, Arjuna and Moses. These two passages are the closest parallels known to me which are relevant to our theme in those Holy Scriptures.

1 The Old Testament background for “experience of the Divine”

It is startling to note that quite a number of OT texts actually *require* that humans should “know” (ידע) God. Let me give some examples:¹

God makes his famous statement in Hos 6:6, declaring: “For I delight in loyalty, and not sacrifice, in knowledge of God, more than in holocausts.” *God wishes that he be known*, and takes pleasure in it; he even appreciates this more than the two highest categories of offerings.

¹ For a general overview see the old, but still valid monograph of Botterweck (1951), besides the relevant articles in the dictionaries.

God's desire tries to counterbalance a lamentable situation described shortly before, in Hos 4:1, "For there is no faithfulness and no loyalty and no knowledge of God in the country". The *lack of knowing God* leads, immediately afterwards (Hos 4:2), to a series of grave iniquities and sins, thus violating the covenant ratified at Mount Sinai on the basis of the Decalogue. An *ideal* is presented in Jer 31:34. There is no longer any need to encourage people to "Know the Lord!", as "For they all know me, from their smallest to their greatest". Once again, it is God's wish to be known, and even more, that this knowledge of him should be widespread and include everyone without any exhortation or teaching.

To "know" God, in Hebrew, expresses an *internal, personal bond* with him, including even practical behaviour corresponding to it.² Obviously the Bible presupposes that this is possible and desirable, as there is not one passage with a negative reference to it and God clearly aims to achieve it. The variety of references to the theme is very broad; even foreign nations are invited to know God (see Jer 16:19-21).³ The *precondition* is also sometimes expressed: only because God "makes himself known" (עָרַךְ יְיָ nifal, Exo 6:3; Ezek 20:9; etc.) are humans able to know him.

The usage of the Hebrew יָדַע, "to know" God, clearly shows the biblical conviction that mankind can experience in some way the Divine and *regards it as essential* for human life. Without it, we are not able to fulfil what we have been created for. At the same time, the Bible testifies to the *difficulty* of perceiving God. This becomes quite clear with another key word for the experience of the Divine, namely "to see" (Hebrew רָאָה).

In contrast to the use of "to know", the passages which refer to seeing God convey an *ambivalent picture*.⁴ Exo 24:10-11 says that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy of the Elders of Israel "saw the God of Israel ...; they viewed God".⁵ There seems to be no doubt that this is possible. Yet, just a few chapters later within the same book, God himself expresses "... for man cannot see me and live" (Exo 33:20). In the former passage, following the confirmation of the covenant, God grants a select group, among whom Moses ranks first, to look upon him, whereas in the latter text the same Moses is told that this is impossible for mortals. Does God contradict himself?

The contrast incites us to investigate more deeply what is meant. VINCENT calls Exo 24 the "Urerfahrung der Gottesschau".⁶ It is not a description of God himself; the object of the vi-

² Schottroff (1978) 686 and 694.

³ The knowledge of God is a major theme in the Exodus narrative, encompassing both Israelites (e.g. Exo 6:7) and Egyptians, with the Pharaoh (as in Exo 7:17; 14:4.18). Even the foes are going to know God. - This motif receives extensive attention in Ezekiel (see, for example, Ezek 6:7.10.13f); Deissler (1987) perceives it as fundamental for the prophets (cf. the title of his book: "Dann wirst du Gott erkennen").

⁴ The most elaborate and still quite recent (2004) study has been presented by Fornara.

⁵ To "view" renders another Hebrew word (חָזַק), evoking prophetic visions (Hanson (1992) 559; Dohmen (2004) 205).

⁶ This corresponds to "prime experience of seeing God": Vincent (1996) 15.

sion in v10 is mentioned as “and below his feet (there was) what looked like the work of a sapphire plate, and like the heavens themselves in purity”.⁷ The view of the Israelite notables is *definitely limited*.⁸ They perceive not even his feet, but only what is below them. Also v11, with “view God”, does not change this interpretation (see note 5 above). As a result, Exo 24 renders an experience of the Divine, yet restricts it dramatically. This encounter may be taken as a *real perception of God*; nevertheless one has to be aware that God himself has *not become fully visible*.

Recognition of this ambivalence is essential for an understanding of nearly all the OT texts about seeing God. On one hand, they *affirm that God is accessible*; on the other hand, they specify this notion with *limiting concepts*, e.g. with the addition of an object, like the “face” of God, as in Ps 42:3 “When may I come and see⁹ the face of God?” This immediately raises another important issue for our theme: what exactly is meant by “seeing God” or his face. In the opinion of SMITH, this motif in the Psalms “represents the culminating experience in the temple”.¹⁰ But it cannot be restricted to it, as other passages like Ps 11:7; 17:15 (both of them with רָחַם) show.

At the end of this first part I would like to summarize the main points:

- a) In the conviction of the Bible, humans not only have an *ability* to experience the Divine, but also the *obligation to do so*.
- b) At the same time the Bible shows that perceiving God is a *risky business*, possibly even dangerous to one’s life.
- c) The use of verbs like “to know”, “to see”, etc. is taken from human experiences and *metaphorically applied* to the encounter with the Divine.
- d) There remains a *dialectic* between the general affirmation of an experience of God, and its restrictions and limited nature, leaving open God’s being as a mystery.

2 The desire to see God

The human wish to experience God is *deep-rooted*. As a result, it is present in texts of various ages and cultures. Besides the two special passages we are going to discuss we also find it in the Gospel of Thomas, where Logion 59 says: “Jesus said: ‘Look for the Living One while you are alive, lest you die and then *seek to see* him and you will be unable to see (him).’”¹¹ This suggests

⁷ The hebrew word for “purity” could also be rendered as clarity or brightness.

⁸ Dohmen (2004) 205; Heininger (1996) 51.

⁹ The Masoretic vocalization has even changed “to see” into “appear” (from רָאָה in the qal stem to nifal), in order to mitigate the expression.

¹⁰ Smith (1988) 181; similarly Heininger (1996) 52.

¹¹ English translation by De Conick (1996) 123. - Compare also the similar theme in John 14:7-9.

that God should be sought for during life-time lest after death it might prove vain to do so. In the entrance to the Sinai narrative, in Exo 19, we find God's warning, communicated to Moses: "Go down, caution the people against breaking through to Yhwh *to see*, and many of them would fall!" (Exo 19:21). God's advice presupposes that Israel is longing to perceive him and that this wish could become so strong as to step over the well-set boundaries for his appearance in the theophany.

The two above-mentioned passages are directed at a broad audience and are formulated in an open way, without further specification, but there are particular texts that go beyond this general desire. They show the *quest for a definitive experience of God* which is no longer questionable and where he becomes known in an immediate way that transcends all human boundaries.¹² They are expressed by *two outstanding individuals*, standing close to God and appreciated by the Divinity: Arjuna, and Moses. Both of them ask God to reveal his inmost being to them. We now pass over to them, starting with the Bhagavadgita.

2.1 The Bhagavadgita

The relevant passage stands in *chapter 11*, entitled "The Yoga of the Vision of the Cosmic Form".¹³ The discourse there follows on from the two previous chapters, developing their arguments further. Chapter 9, bearing the title "The Yoga of the Kingly Science and the Kingly Secret",¹⁴ deals with the special knowledge and the mystery of who God is. The tenth discourse receives quite divergent presentations; relatively faithful seem to be the renderings "Discipline of Supernal-Manifestations"¹⁵ or "The Yoga of Divine Glories",¹⁶ as it concentrates on God's encompassing power and the ways the divine glory manifests itself.

Given this pre-context, discourse 11 stands in a *logical sequence* to the two preceding chapters which treat divine appearance and human perception of it, and the theme continues into discourse 12 which concentrates on "devotion". This connection becomes immediately obvious

¹² In the "Spiritual Exercises" of Saint Ignatius of Loyola the rules for discernment in the Second Week allude to such an experience. Number 330 says: "Only God, our Lord, can console the soul with no previous occasion", further going on to explain "With no previous occasion' means without any preceding awareness or knowledge of anything which might induce such comfort in the soul, by means of its own acts of intellect and will."

¹³ Sivananda 297, and Brück 249; very close to it, just omitting the first two words, Tapasyananda 284: "The Vision of the Cosmic Form". Quite differently are the free renderings and superscriptions of Radhakrishnan 269, "The Lord's Transfiguration", or of Prabhupada 517, "The universal Form". - These "titles" originally stand at the end of the chapters, not as headings.

¹⁴ Sivananda 229; Tapasyananda 233, renders "kingly" two times by "sovereign".
¹⁵ Edgerton 54.

¹⁶ Sivananda 265. Others deviate largely, e.g. Prabhupada 471: "The Fullnesses of the Absolute", or Radhakrishnan 256, "God is the Source of all; to know Him is to know all".

when reading Bhag. 11:54f. where these last two slokas present devotion as a way to experience the Divine, thus preparing the way for the next discourse.

We may conclude that chapter 11 is *well situated* in terms of its context and in one sense may be seen to *conclude* discourses 9-11 which focus on the knowledge of God. They seem to form a *progression* towards chapter 11, culminating in the special apparition of Krishna to Arjuna there.

After this reflection on the context we may proceed to the *key passage* for our theme, namely sloka 3 (Bhag. 11:3).

*evam etad yath' ātta tvam ātmānam param' eśvara
draṣṭum icchāmi te rūpam aiśvaram puruṣ' ottama*

A literal translation of its second line runs, following the Sanskrit order of words, like this: “to see (I) desire thy form sovereign/divine, highest being – best”. The whole sloka 3 is rendered in various ways: a) “(Now) O Supreme Lord, as Thou hast thus described Thyself, O Supreme Person, I wish to see Thy divine form”¹⁷; b) “Thou art, O Lord Supreme, even as what Thou hast declared Thyself to be. (I understand and accept it.) Yet I now desire to see that form of Thine as the Lord of all”¹⁸; c) “So be it, O Highest God, as you have described yourself. Yet I still crave to behold your form as God, O Supreme Person”¹⁹; d) “Thus it is, as Thou declarest Thyself, O Supreme Lord. I desire to see Thy form as God, O Supreme Spirit”²⁰; e) “Even as thou describest thyself, O Highest Lord, so crave I to behold that form of thine as Lord, Person Supreme”²¹; f) “I have heard thy words of truth, but my soul is yearning to see: to see thy form as God of this all”²². In addition, for comparison, here are four German translations: g) „Die Form, die du beschrieben hast, Die göttliche, die laß mich sehen, O Herr der Welt, o höchster Geist, Erhöre gnädig dies mein Flehen“²³; h) „So ist es, wie Du Dich selbst dargestellt hast, o höchster Gebieter. Ich begehre nun, Deine göttliche Gestalt und Deinen göttlichen Leib zu erblicken, o Purushottama“²⁴; i) „O größte aller Persönlichkeiten, o höchste Form, obwohl ich Dich in Deiner wahren Identität hier vor mir sehe, so wie Du Dich Selbst beschrieben hast, möchte ich sehen,

¹⁷ Sivananda 299.

¹⁸ Tapasyananda 286; the inserted colon in the middle is an explanatory commentary without foundation in the original text.

¹⁹ Bahm 92.

²⁰ Edgerton 55; the translation “spirit” for Sanskrit *puruṣa* “highest being” is a choice, as is its other rendering as “person”; it is also found with Boxberger and Brück (see below).

²¹ Hill 158.

²² Mascaró 89. Among the English translations, his one is the most free.

²³ Boxberger 69. His rendering is very poetic, in rhyme and strophes, but at the cost of literalness; so his fourth line here has no correspondence in the original.

²⁴ Aurobindo 70. There is a discrepancy in his rendering: On one side he transliterates “Purushottama”, for the Sanskrit *puruṣ'ottama* (best, highest being), on the other side he adds freely “and your divine body”, thus anticipating the coming revelation.

wie Du in diese kosmische Manifestation eingegangen bist. Ich wünsche mir, diese Deine Form zu sehen“²⁵; j) „Genau so, wie du über dich selbst gesprochen hast, o höchster Herr, verlangt es mich, deine Herrlichkeits-Gestalt zu schauen, o höchster göttlicher Geist!“²⁶.

What is evident from all these translations is Arjuna’s desire to see God. His wish is *based on previous revelation* which is referred to in the first line of sloka 3, talking of Krishna’s self-description up to now; one may think of his words in chapters 9-10, manifesting himself to Arjuna. The combination of the two lines establishes a *contrast and a progression*. That God has shown himself before in words is not enough for his friend who asks much more of him: to see him, and in his highest form. This enhancement of his desire corresponds to the progression noted in the context (cf. above).

From the point of view of literary technique, this decisive switch in content – from speech to vision – requires another kind of presentation. Fittingly, the voice of the narrator, in the person of *Sanjaya*, appears again in chapter 11, in three instances (slokas 9-14; 35 and 50). He had been absent since 2:9-10, and he will appear again only in the final chapter (18:74-78), to conclude the Gita.²⁷ This, too, indicates the enormous importance of our passage within the whole book. It can rightly be considered as its *climax*.²⁸

Arjuna’s desire for a vision of Krishna finds *other expressions* within the same chapter. In the very next sloka (11:4) he asks him “to reveal” to him his imperishable (everlasting) self. As in the Bible (see above in 1), “to see” and “to reveal” belong together: only because God shows himself, is his friend able to perceive him.

Another interesting parallel with the Bible is found in the middle of chapter 11. In sloka 31 Arjuna says, “I desire to know Thee”.²⁹ His wish *to know* Krishna (more) comes after the latter has revealed himself to him, preannounced in 11:5-8, narrated in 11:9-14 by Sanjaya and described by Arjuna in 11:15-31 in his personal words.³⁰ In this way, the Bhagavadgita also testifies to the close relation of both verbs (“to see” and “to know”) with regard to the experience of the Divine. In addition, 11:31 shows a *still growing desire* for the knowledge of God, which also

²⁵ Bhaktivedanta 519. His translation is the longest one, very free, and presents already an interpretation, filling in a concessive clause (starting with “obwohl ...”) and another subordinate clause (beginning with “wie ...”), etc. He also switches the word order (see the two vocatives in parallelism at the start).

²⁶ Brück 250.

²⁷ The only signs of the narrating voice in between are the short introductions of the speeches, clarifying the respective speakers.

²⁸ Glasenapp 4, among many others. - Griffiths 249, has a different position: he disputes chapter 11 as peak of the Bhagavadgita arguing that its revelation remains on the level of outward appearance and we are still called to see and go beyond it.

²⁹ Translation by Sivananda 315; other renderings do not essentially differ.

³⁰ The threefold presentation is another means to highlight the importance of this divine manifestation in chapter 11, attributing to it an outstanding character.

can be observed in the Bible,³¹ and its position at the end of Arjuna's speech emphasizes its significance.

God gives in to Arjuna's desire, announcing to him that he will appear to him in many colours and forms, wonders up to now unseen (11:5f). His friend will perceive the whole of the universe as a unity in God's body, and he is able to do so because he is granted "divine eyes" (11:7f; cf. 1 Sam 16:7).

After this, the narrator Sanjaya gives a *description of the vision* (11:9-13), confirming Krishna's revelation and highlighting certain aspects, like countless faces in all directions, heavenly ornaments, a brilliance comparable to innumerable³² suns, etc. Sanjaya concludes with the effect upon Arjuna who is seized by amazement and fright³³ and starts to worship (11:14); at the same time this sloka brings the transition to Arjuna's long speech (11:15-31).

It is not within the scope of this investigation to go in detail into Arjuna's *perception of the theophany* which contains a mixture of various motifs and elements, bringing together his vision, salutations to God, human reactions, petitions for mercy ... and ending with the wish for increased knowledge of God already mentioned. Probably the most intriguing trait about Krishna's revelation, which also receives the most extensive representation (11:23-30), is his wide open mouth with fangs devouring numerous men, among them prestigious kings, warriors and heroes.

The renewed, intensified desire of Arjuna is *again answered by Krishna* (11:32-34) who now identifies himself as the mighty, all-consuming, annihilating time (sloka 32), encourages Arjuna to take up the mission as his instrument (sloka 33) and commands him to kill four persons mentioned by name and other heroes, too, with the promise of being victorious (sloka 34).

As before (11:14), Sanjaya also now *reports the reaction of Arjuna* (11:35). This time, terror and worship are notably increased: Arjuna's body is trembling, his voice falters, he prostrates himself while continuing his adoration, which receives another expression in his subsequent, prolonged speech (11:36-46). Therein, at the end, he asks God to return to his normal appearance (sloka 45f) which is then reported by Sanjaya and confirmed by Arjuna (sloka 50f). In between (11:47-49), God emphasizes the *uniqueness of this vision of him* granted only to Arjuna; in conclusion (11:52-55, esp. sloka 54) he opens up the possibility of viewing his universal form and even entering into him to any person totally devoted to him.

From the point of view of theophany, chapter 11 of the Bhagavadgita certainly offers the *culmination*. Literary techniques, like the reappearance of the narrator's voice, the repetition

³¹ There is yet another feature in common: at the end of this sloka Arjuna admits to not being able to understand God and his actions. This corresponds to the limited nature of human perception of the divine, to which Ps 139 also bears wonderful testimony.

³² Sanskrit *sahasra* means literally "thousand", but its sense is larger, as with the Hebrew רבבה which not only stands for ten thousand, but also for a huge quantity, an immense number.

³³ This is not expressed directly, but his "hairs standing" may be an indication of it.

of key themes, etc., help to enhance the significance of God's revelation. Arjuna's desire to see God in his original form is the trigger for the unique divine manifestation, and it is accompanied by acts of worship.

2.2 The Book of Exodus

As in the Bhagavadgita, Moses' desire to see God is also deeply *imbedded into its context*. After the incident with the Golden Calf (Exo 32) there are a series of conversations between God and Moses, trying to mend in various steps what has been broken by the failures of the people and Aaron.

The first dialogue in Exo 32:7-14 takes place on the same day and manages to deflect from the Israelites the *danger of elimination*. On the next day, after having seen personally what has happened, Moses once again talks with God, pleading for his forgiveness (32:31-34). After that, a divine speech to Moses in 33:1-3 is reported to the people and leads to a gesture of penance (33:4-6). The next passage refers to the tent of meeting (33:7-11) which has to be pitched outside the camp,³⁴ as a consequence of the earlier breaking of the covenant.

Then Moses initiates a *long conversation* starting in 33:12 and ending with 34:3; *in the middle*, we find the crucial passage where he asks God to show him his glory (33:18). One night passes, and the next day Moses ascends the mountain again (34:4) for the decisive encounter with God (34:5-9), followed by a renewal of the covenant (34:10, and its accompanying stipulations, the "privilege law" in 34:11-26). The final verses of Exo 34 deal with the tablets (34:27f) and the new appearance of Moses marked by his shining face (34:29-35).

This short look at the context tells us that Moses' demand in 33:18 forms the *centre* of the structure of Exo 32-34. It stands in the central conversation, right at the core. The key significance of it is further enhanced by other means, like the long preparation before, or the number of God's answers to it (see below). Moses had started the dialogue with a *complaint and a request* (33:12f): "... but you have not let me know whom you will send with me ... And now, ... let me know your ways, that I may know you ...". There is a *double ambiguity* in Moses words. The complaint in v12 focusses on an accompanying person, whereas his petition asks for information about God's ways. This latter request is further motivated by the aim of knowing God, establishing a connection between "your ways" and "you". God, in his answer in 33:14, introduces yet *another nuance*: "My face will go with you ...". The key word "face" takes up the end of the previous small unit³⁵ and continues to play an essential role until the end of Exo 34, being applied to

³⁴ The tent is not yet extant, but had only be shown to Moses on the mountain (Exo 25-31). So this small unit refers to the future, with Dohmen (2004) 320.

³⁵ Exo 33:11: "And God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend". This personal relationship "face

God as well as to Moses. The “face” is the figurative expression of a *direct, personal contact* in an open encounter, also symbolic of God’s presence.³⁶ Its combination with “go” is a promise, but does not fix God; he can also choose other ways.

The next three verses (33:15-17) serve to *widen and to strengthen* what has been granted. The repeated use of the first person plural explicitly includes the people in God’s promise. It is taken up in exactly that form in v15, but receives a variation in v16 to “you go with us”. This again shows the close relation between “face” and whole person. Such an escort by God himself makes Israel distinguished and privileged among all peoples, and God even concedes this (v17).

Moses’ third request in 33:18 belongs to this *dynamics of increased petitions*. He asks: “Let me see, please, your glory!” He introduces with “glory” another important new word tied to theophanies.³⁷ With this background, “glory” can be understood as a *manifestation of God himself* in his brightness and saving power. Moses’ wish is not motivated in any way, e.g. by a concern for the people.³⁸

The delicate nature of Moses’ desire becomes further transparent in how *God handles it*. In four answers³⁹ he displays willingness to reveal himself and, at the same time, great care in doing so. The first three replies form a progression, the last one gives concrete instructions. God *begins in Exo 33:19*, saying: “I, I will let pass all my goodness before your face, and I will pronounce the name YHWH before⁴⁰ you ...”. God does not turn down Moses’ demand, but he *redirects it* by introducing new words, among them the new key word “to pass”, the term “goodness” and the expression “to pronounce the name YHWH”. The two verbs are announcements for the future and find their *only fulfilment* in Exo 34:5f; the latter passage has therefore to be regarded

to face” is repeated affirmatively at the end of Moses’ life, as an outstanding feature, in Deut 34:10.

³⁶ Hartenstein (2001) 160, sees the concept of “audience” as background for the use of “face” here. He even extends this idea, speaking of God’s throne and kingly protection (p. 173). – Seebass (2004) 313, understands “face” in the sense of “cultic representation”; but this does not fit well the context of Exo 33.

³⁷ In Exodus, it had already been used in the narrative of the manna and the quails (16:7.10) and the encounter with God after the conclusion of the covenant (24:16f); it will appear again when the sanctuary is completed (40:34f). In addition, the verb of the same root occurs three times at the crossing of the Reed Sea (14:4.7f). – John’s Gospel uses the same phrase “to see the glory” already in the prologue (John 1:14).

³⁸ This does not mean that his desire comes out of self-interest (so, too, Welker [2003] 151: neither curiosity nor event-mania), on the contrary: immediately before, in v15f, he tied the people into the grace conveyed to him, and in his next words, after God’s appearance, he includes them in his plea (34:9). – Houtman (2000) 701, understands Moses’ pushing for a personal encounter as a kind of guarantee that God “will indeed travel with Moses and Israel”. The revelation for Moses thus has a function with regard to the whole people.

³⁹ Most exegetes count only three, namely 33:19; 33:20 and 33:21-23 (e.g. Seidl [1993] 7; Hartenstein [2001] 171), without taking into account 34:1-3; positive exceptions are Jacob (1997) 959, and Dohmen (2004) 347f.

⁴⁰ The Hebrew word for “before” comes from the same root as “face”; one could also translate: to your face.

as the realization of God's promise here.⁴¹ What God means by "goodness"⁴² receives a further explanation in the second half of v19 where he says: "... and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." The syntactical construction is very close to Exo 3:14, *God's revelation* to Moses at the burning bush,⁴³ so that it may be regarded as a continuation from there. At the same time, both verbs are connected with God's self-disclosure in 34:6 as "compassionate and gracious", which uses the same roots in reversed order. 33:19 thus has to be read as a *preparation* for God's revelation there, forming the middle step in a threefold movement.

God's *second answer* follows in 33:20: "You cannot see my face, because man cannot see me and live." After generally accepting Moses' demand (v19), God now *restricts it* and shows the limitations. He takes up the central idea "to see" from v18, but combines it with the key word "face" (see above v14), excluding a full, immediate perception of him⁴⁴ as inaccessible to human beings. Respecting this ambivalence between acceptance (v19) and restriction (v20), God's *third answer* (v21-23) gives a *viable solution* by placing Moses in a cleft of the rock. The key words occur again: "... when my glory passes by ... until I pass by (v22). And I will remove my hand, and you will see my back; but my face cannot be seen" (v23). The decisive change takes place towards the end. The last line confirms v20, but before it God grants Moses to see his "back", i.e. Moses may perceive God, but only after he has passed by – his *vision will remain limited*.⁴⁵

When and how does God fulfil his promise? It is only after the *fourth answer* commanding Moses to cut another two tablets of stone and ascend again the mountain on the next day (34:1-3) and Moses' execution of it (34:4), that *God discloses himself* to him: "And Yhwh came down in the cloud, and stood with him there, and pronounced the name Yahweh. And Yhwh passed by before his face, and pronounced: 'Yhwh, Yhwh, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and faithfulness ...'" (34:5f).

⁴¹ With Hartenstein (2001) 171. Seebass (2004) 302, wants to deny it, but has no better explanation and later establishes himself this same connection (p. 315). - In addition, "to pass" forms a contrast to the veneration of cult images and statues: they remain on their respective places, without being able to move (Dohmen [1998] 45).

⁴² Welker (2003) 154, understands it as (only) God's positive side, without his ability to deliver wrath or judgment which otherwise appears, too.

⁴³ Also Dohmen (2004) 349, and others. - The meaning of this construction seems to be: the repetition of the verb confirms the general idea, i.e. being gracious; the special kind of relative clause leaves its realization open to God and thus preserves his freedom (see Fischer [1989] 152f).

⁴⁴ The two sentences switch with regard to the object of "to see": first with "face", then with "me", bringing them into a close relationship. The Septuagint levels the difference by repeating "face" a second time, instead of "me". In Exodus, the LXX generally tends to suppress the idea that one could see God (Himbaza [2005] 109).

⁴⁵ Dohmen (2004) 352, interprets this passage in its spiritual relevance. Most times, people become aware of God's presence only afterwards, in their reflection. In a similar direction, Vincent (1996) 37, interprets God's passing by, namely that he can be perceived only *a posteriori*, and compares this to the disciples of Emmaus, in Luke 24.

God reveals his character here in v6f in the so-called “*Gnadenformel*”,⁴⁶ with an abounding prevalence of grace with regard to justice. The repetition of key words clearly indicates this appearance of God as the realization of God’s promises in answer to Moses’ requests (see 33:19 above). Also the sequel in 34:8f presupposes this, with Moses hastening to prostrate himself and pleading for forgiveness.

In all these verses 5-7 there is no *description or even hint of seeing*. Obviously, the vision is not important, and all the emphasis goes to *God’s words*. They convey what he is. Whoever experiences his graciousness, “sees” him and his inner self.⁴⁷

The continuation in v8f again underlines this shift from vision to communication of his inner being as compassionate. Moses takes up the motifs “wickedness” and “sin” from God’s revelation in v7 and asks God to *forgive* them. This seems to be the last step of healing for the people’s offense, because in v10 God can once again make a covenant with them.

A final moment of the overall passage is *Moses’ shining face* in 34:29-35, concluding fittingly the dynamics of the narrative. The human mediator mirrors his encounter with God; it is as if his face has become transparent for God’s face. In him and upon him splendour and glory of the Divine becomes visible. Looking back on Moses’ desire in Exo 33f, we can say that it leads to the *climax of God’s self-revelation*.⁴⁸ God accepts the demand, but answers it in an unexpected way. The dynamics of those two chapters clearly demonstrates the *central role* of Moses and his closeness to God; he is granted a singular experience of the Divine.⁴⁹

2.3 A Comparison

Due to limitations of time and space, our investigation has touched on *just a few details* in both texts. We will now try to compare them.

⁴⁶ This term has been coined by Spieckermann (1990).

⁴⁷ Various aspects underline the centrality and essential importance of Exo 34:6f within the Bible; one reason, among many others, is that it is taken up several times, especially in the Psalms, and also serves as a leading program within the Book of the Twelve Prophets (for the latter, see Scoralick [2002]; for an overview of the passages: Vannoni [1995] 70f).

⁴⁸ Similarly Timmer (2007) 97. For this reason, it cannot be regarded as a “repetition of the first encounter” in Exo 24, as Vincent (1996) 20, suggests.

⁴⁹ Seidl (1993) 8, thinks that Moses has gone beyond the limits with his request in Exo 33:18. He also conceives a polemic against him as direct mediator of revelation (p. 9) in the corrective phrases in v20.23. Yet the continuation of the narrative and the progression towards the “*Gnadenformel*” and the renewal of the covenant are contrary to his interpretation.

Obviously, there are a *number of common traits* in chapter 11 of the Bhagavadgita and in Exo 33f:

- the desire to see God
- its connection with revelation
- its exclusiveness (Bhag. 11:6, 47f; cf. Exo 33:11; Num 12:7f)
- the presentation as dialogues
- main figures (Arjuna; Moses)
- favorable answers by God
- pleas for forgiveness (Bhag. 11:25, 31, 42, 44f; Exo 32:32; 34:9)
- central position within the larger narrative, etc.⁵⁰

These many parallel elements *require an explanation*. The distance in space (India – Israel) and the differences in the elaboration of the various motifs seem to preclude a direct dependence. Probably there is also a considerable interval in time.⁵¹ Thus one should not seek *to surmise an intertextual relationship*. Nevertheless, the large number of shared motifs points to a *common experience*. The desires of Arjuna and of Moses are essentially the same. Also their contexts and the development of the whole narratives display a number of similar features, as if in these early times people in widely separated countries felt alike – a kind of *transcultural and international concord in religious yearning*.

However, whilst noting the similarities, one must not overlook the *differences*. The Bhagavadgita emphasizes very much the *visible appearance* of Krishna. Sanjaya's description (slokas 10-12) and Arjuna's reaction (e.g. 11:23-25) concentrate on what can be seen. Correspondingly, Krishna's *body* plays an important role.⁵² Contrasts with the Bible are God's self-identification with the all-consuming time (sloka 32) and the following command for battle and killing (slokas 33f).⁵³

The book of Exodus also differs markedly from the Bhagavadgita in that although Moses asks to see God's glory, *no vision at all* is described. Instead, the whole emphasis goes to God's self-revelation in words as essentially and abundantly gracious (Exo 34:6f). Another divergence lies in the *dialogue* itself: its scope is to establish anew the covenant with God; the in-

⁵⁰ There are many other features which the Bhagavadgita and Exodus share, like the physical impossibility to see God (Bhag. 11:8; Exo 33:20), veneration of God and respectful addresses to him (very intense in the Bhag.), the parallelism of "to see" and "to know" (see above in 2.1), the term "wonder" (Bhag. 11:6; Exo 34:10), the "light"-motif in the context of the theophany (Bhag. 11:12.17.19.30 ...; cf. Exo 19:16.18), ...

⁵¹ According to Glasenapp, the core of the Bhagavadgita could have been extant shortly before 300 BC. For the book of Exodus, as part of the Torah, the historical setting is much disputed; generally, most scholars would accept a date sometime before 400 BC.

⁵² It is mentioned often, including parts of it, like his mouth (as in slokas 26-30).

⁵³ Exo 32, too, contains in v25-29 an episode with a command to kill (v27), but given by Moses. This passage constantly raises resistance and opposition; the remarks of Dohmen (2004) 312-314, are helpful in this regard.

terchange between the speakers is quite frequent and elaborate; God's answers show a sophisticated, delicate balance of acceptance and restriction, in a series of progressive steps.

In addition, it can be observed that both holy texts seem to have a similar aim: by their privileged experience of the Divine, Arjuna and Moses become authorities on the highest level; as nobody else has ever been granted such a vision, they are and remain *points of reference*.⁵⁴

3 Conclusion

We have seen the outstanding importance of two key texts in the respective Holy Scriptures. The desire to see God, leading to a direct, immediate revelation of him, forms something like an "*Archimedean point*", a central point from which all other elements within the religious system receive their proper place.

This desire of Arjuna and Moses is quite different from the action of *Prometheus* who took away fire from the gods to bring it to man. Arjuna and Moses are not taking sides in a conflict between two parties, but *bridging the differences* by their wish to get a glimpse of what God himself really is.

This *longing for divine vision* is widely attested in other cultures and religions.⁵⁵ Within the Bible, there are many other texts confirming that humans were granted such an experience of God (e.g. Hagar in Gen 16:13; the people in Deut 5:24; St. Paul⁵⁶ in the NT). One can note an interesting distinction: central biblical passages contain visions, whereas other visions (from outside, or after the conclusion of the canon) are denied any relevance.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most fascinating element of this motif-study is the *balance and tension* in God's appearance: he reveals himself, yet at the same time the perception of him remains restricted.⁵⁸ This ambivalence seems inherent, as it impregnates the two climactic texts. The dialectic of seeing God, but not fully, reflects the fact that every encounter has something of a mystery and is

⁵⁴ For the Bhagavadgita, Bhaktivedanta 517, highlights that this special vision of God sets a standard, to convince others and to exclude cheats who might present themselves in the future as divine incarnations.

⁵⁵ For pagan hellenistic texts, see Berger (1992). Weber (2000) shows well the importance of visions and dreams in the Roman Empire. Waldmann (1996) brings forth their relevance for the founder of Islamic faith, Mohammed.

⁵⁶ For his role as visionary, see esp. the monograph of Heininger (1996); therein chapters 6 and 7 also deal with inter-testamentary literature.

⁵⁷ Berger (1992) 223f. - A similar tendency to downplay the possibility of a direct vision of God can already be observed within the Septuagint: In Exo 24:10f the Greek translation inserts twice "the place", thus softening the original notion of seeing God (Hanson [1992] 559).

⁵⁸ In part, this is also true for the Bhagavadgita: Arjuna perceives Krishna only for a limited time in this special way, and he is even asking for its cessation (Bhag. 11:45f), as otherwise it would be too much for him to bear (cf. also Exo 20:18-21, the people's request after God's addressing them directly in the Decalogue).

not definitive, *leaving open*⁵⁹ the way towards a still deeper communion and the challenge to seek it.

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⁵⁹ This point is stressed by Welker (2003) 155, and Vincent (1996) 39. – Finally, I wish to thank Mrs. F. Stephens for having corrected the English of this article and Fr. Richy Lopes SJ for his controlling of the Sanskrit.

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