

2015 Synod Bible Study

<http://www.ao.net/~fmoeller/shekinah.htm>

Slide 1: 'Shining' Synod Theme: "From, through, and to God be the glory forever"

1 Samuel 3:1-4 Add Isaiah 6:2-3 God's shekinah fills the Temple ... but also overflows it, so that 'the whole earth is full of God's shekinah'

Use First Footsteps temple image: If whole earth is full of shekinah then that means Australia too and Indonesia and Aotearoa ... and God's shekinah - *though invisible to many* - can be discerned in everything God has made (Romans 1). We need open eyes to see it!

Slide 2: Samuel and Eli

1 Samuel 3:1-4 (CEV alt)

¹Samuel served the LORD by helping Eli the priest. In those days, the LORD [did not often speak] directly to people and did not often appear to them in dreams. ²But one night, Eli, who by that time was almost blind, was asleep in his room. ³[The holy lamp was still alight] and Samuel was sleeping on a mat near the sacred chest in the LORD's house. They had not been asleep very long. ⁴Then the LORD called out, 'Samuel! Samuel!'

Samuel answered "Here I am!"

Slide 3: **Luke the Evangelist** was a scholar-historian. Before he wrote his gospel Luke would have followed the method used by classic historians in his day, and still in our day: reading source documents, and talking to eyewitnesses. Tradition also suggests that Luke studied medicine (his healing stories are many and detailed) - and classical training for doctors was the same: reading source documents, and learning face to face from a mentor. One strong tradition teaches that Luke's eyewitness evidence came from Mary the mother of Jesus, possibly Peter, and probably Paul. Luke used Mark's gospel as a primary source as well.

Slide 4: **LXX** The main document that Luke would have studied in great detail was the Hebrew Bible in its inspired Greek translation - the 'Septuagint' or LXX. The New Testament is so crowded with references to the Old Testament that it would fall to pieces if you took them out - but Luke uses the LXX in a unique way. You could almost call it a *doctrine of recurrences*.

Luke writes the story of the Holy Spirit - how the Holy Spirit works through Jesus, and then how the Holy Spirit works through the disciples and apostles. And almost everything that unfolds in Luke's story connects back to examples from the Old Testament.

Slide 5: Mary of Nazareth ... So when Luke heard how God blessed Mary - an unmarried teenager from a poor homeland village - Luke went back to the Old Testament. And there was the story he wanted: [... (click) image of Hannah appears] the story of Hannah, a barren woman given a miracle child by God's special blessing.

Slide 6: In ecstasy, Hannah sings of a God who remembers the humble, feeds the poor, empties the power of the proud, and sends the rich hungry away. And Mary in Luke's gospel sings the same song: Slide 7 - a God of the poor, the humble, the forgotten.

Then Samuel is born; Samuel, whose name means 'Name of God' (in other words, someone in whom God's own identity will shine out). And Hannah keeps her promise: Samuel is given back to God, raised as a priest and prophet.

Then Jesus is born; Jesus, whose name means 'Joshua' - the One who saves. And Mary dedicates Jesus to God even though she knows a 'sword of sorrow will pierce her heart'.

Slide 8: Jesus in Temple So Luke binds the two stories together: Mary's blessed son is a *recurrence* of Hannah's blessed son. That's why only Luke's gospel tells the story of how a twelve-year-old Jesus (in other words, a *na'ar*, the Jewish name for a boy *before initiation*) goes to the Temple because he hears the voice of God's call.

Luke's story is a *recurrence* of Samuel's story. Our reading tells the first part of the story, how twelve-year-old Samuel, an uninitiated *na'ar*, hears God call in the night and answers 'Here I am'.

Our reading doesn't include the rest of the story, how Samuel doesn't recognise God's voice and has to be persuaded that God is truly calling him. Then God gives little Samuel a message full of deadly news to the kindly old Eli who is caring for him. Samuel tries to hide the warning, but when Eli insists, Samuel faithfully records what God had spoken. From that day on, the Bible says, 'God made everything Samuel said come true.'

Luke's story has a key difference: Jesus knows the voice of God - knows it so well he calls it a 'father-voice', like the Teaching-Fathers (maybe a mother's brother) of Indigenous boys who must always be respected and obeyed. Then when Jesus is scolded for the terror he has caused his parents by going missing (a terror every parent knows deep down in the heart), Jesus has a message for Joseph, his human mentor-father, just like Samuel for Eli. And it is a sad message just like Samuel's - "I must follow my true 'father', not you, Joseph". So I think Luke wants us to remember Samuel's story and realise how hard it was for Jesus to say those words - and how hard it would have been for Joseph, just like Eli, to hear them.

Both boys are children of blessing; both hear God's call *in a Temple place*; both feel sad about the news they need to share; but both are faithful to the God who calls them. And from that faithfulness God brings *truth*. "God made everything Samuel said come true." "I am the way, *and the truth*, and the life."

So we can see in Jesus a *recurrence* of Samuel's faithfulness - and that is a signal, from Luke's time right down to ours, that if we too are faithful to God's call, then truth will also shine out through us!

Slide 9: 'Shining' (again) And that word 'shining' leads to the second connection that I think can help us learn from Samuel's story. An even more familiar story of a call was in our lectionary not long ago: the call of Isaiah (also a vision *in the Temple*). And that call even more directly points to the Synod theme: "From, through, and to God be the glory forever".

< Isaiah 6:1-8 >

Slide 10: 'Shining', then "Shekinah" appears The Hebrew people, Jesus' culture roots, had a special word for that blazing fire of glory and awe. Many Christians know the word, too: **Shekinah**.

"Shekinah" is *not* specifically used in Biblical texts, but a later Aramaic expression connected to 'shakan', the verb for 'actively abide as presence-in-community'. (By the time of Jesus it would have been the standard expression for God's glory, especially - but not exclusively - *in the Temple*.)

Slide 11: "- ah" words [*click for each*] The word *Shekinah* is feminine - like *Torah*. There seems to be a general pattern that *things which proceed from God*, and especially *those things that bear fruit* (e.g. progeny) are seen as feminine. Other important examples: *adamah* (the earth-soil), *Ruakh* (the Spirit/Breath/Wind of God), *Hokmah* (Mother-Wisdom, first of God's creative acts), and the change from *Sarai* to *Sarah* to show she will indeed be a mother of nations. Samuel's mother's name is a palindrome - it reads the same backwards and forwards - so "Hannah" almost means 'double-mother'!

This implies that, like other Mother-words, *Shekinah* too describes something proceeding from God *in order to bear fruit*. That is indeed how *Shekinah* was understood in the Targum and later Jewish writing: God's shekinah-glory worked miracles and wonders (both healings and curses) and also helped God's people bear the fruits of righteousness.

Slide 12: Mountain glory From this it follows that the Hebrew understanding of 'the glory of the Lord' (the more literal Hebrew is '*Cavod JHWH*' as on Mt Sinai when Torah was given, as well as Mt Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah help Jesus prepare for his own 'Exodus') was not simply some kind of descriptive dazzle enveloping God Most High. That is one reason why Peter's notion of both enshrining *and confining* the Transfiguration vision into new 'Tabernacles' is so out of touch with what God seeks.

It is also a reason why the call of Moses, the call of Samuel, the call of Isaiah, and the call of Jeremiah all begin with a scene of shekinah-glory, but not simply to admire in awe. Instead, God's glory is [Slide 13]:

**a dynamic grace both calling *and enabling those called*
to live fruitfully in ways that reveal
God's ongoing presence
in the midst of God's people.**

When shekinah-glory calls out to us, we too are meant to answer 'Here am I'. But that does not mean merely rapt contemplation. It means "We are ready to go where we are sent". When Elijah demanded God's pity on Mt Horeb, God answered - in a voice of 'sheer silence' - 'Go back and appoint Elisha to take your place'. Again there is a New Testament connection. [Slide 14: Jesus ascends] 'Why are you standing here gazing into the sky?' say the angels in Acts 1: 'get back to Jerusalem, there's work to do.')

If time allows: There is a warning, too, in Shekinah: God calls us into the light *because the darkness must be confronted*. Songwriter Bruce Cockburn put it very well: we are called 'to kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight'. But are we ready for God's call?

Moses was sent back to face down a mighty kingdom built on human slavery. Samuel was given a message that Eli's own sons had defiled God's sacredness. Elijah mocked a murderous Queen then had to run away for his life. Jeremiah told a king to his face God would toss him out of the city to be buried 'like a donkey'. Jonah strode into the most evil city in civilised history with no weapon but God's truth. And Jesus? First his family tried to shut him up; then his home town tried to throw him off a cliff; then a conspiracy of Roman armies and Jewish collaborators had him crucified.

[Slide 15: Destruction] Today the darkness seems to be spreading. It holds the seats of power; it feasts on the blood of the poor; it laughs at the rape of the earth; [Slide 16] it turns children from their parents and humans from the land and every living thing away from God. *Are we ready for God's call?*

In the story of each of these called ones, there is tragedy too. Moses saw his own older brother lead a rebellion against God; Samuel's own sons went as bad as Eli's; both Elijah and Jeremiah considered suicide; and Jesus was called 'a man of sorrows, who knew suffering right down deep'. Rev Thresi has shared with some of us the hard moments that came with her own answer to God's call. [Slide 17] *Is there anyone here who has not known such pain? Are we ready for God's call?*

Slide 18: Abraham laughs So it is probably fitting that Samuel does not feel ready when God calls. Abraham laughs at God's promise. Barak says 'I won't go unless Deborah goes with me.' Jeremiah insists 'I'm too young'. Amos says 'I'm not a prophet nor from a prophet's family.' Isaiah says 'My mouth is full of rotteness.'

Peter denies Jesus, and the other male disciples all run away. When God calls people to bring the truth to others, most say, 'God, not me.'

Slide 19: Jonah out of the fish But when God insisted, echoed by Eli, Samuel told the truth. Moses went back to Egypt. Amos went north to hostile territory. Peter embraced Gentiles! Even Jonah, the most human prophet of all, realised that if a great fish could say 'yes' to God's call, then Jonah too could go to the most wicked city in the world to speak God's truth.

I think this lesson is clear. It is not our own sense of worth God needs. None of us is called because we 'know' God needs our help. The truth can use us *in spite of* our human weakness - even our wickedness, like Moses the murderer, or Paul the killer of Christians. Slide 20: (1 again) "From, through, and to God be the glory forever" That is why the 'glory' is not from us, but 'from, through, and to God'.

Shekinah is a sign of *promise*. She will make a way: the same female glory-of-presence will not only call *but also enable* the response to be faithful.

Whom God calls, God enables - [Slide 21: (11 again)] through the empowering companion mother-words who walk with us: Adamah, Ruakh, Hokmah, Shekinah.

Let me make that point once more: these Mother-Helpers God sends are not way up in heaven; they are right here amongst us: 'Holy, holy, holy: the *whole earth* is filled with God's glory'.

So Christians in our day need to be careful *not* to make the same mistake as the disciples at the Ascension. If we spend our time 'gazing up into heaven' trying to see Shekinah, we will get nowhere. God's shining presence is right here, filling the earth - and it has always been here. [Slide 22: Cave painting] That's why the First Australians also carved out the first temples in the world. The Shekinah of God's presence - and the call of God to speak the truth - did not wait for missionaries! It has been here all along. Slide 23: Images It shines out in every sunset, every living creature, every young child learning old wisdom.

Slide 24: Isaiah 40 We are not alone: God is in our midst, and God's mother-leaders will lift us on wings like eagles, dreaming new dreams, walking beyond weariness, running with Jesus into the fullness of the glory of God.

Amen.