

פְּנִיָּה

## The Hebrew Word for "Presence"

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The concept of God's "Presence" is a central theme to the Hebrew Bible. Often God is understood as omnipresent or all-present. Yet, there are occasions where Biblical authors seemed to request His presence in unique ways. These petitions seem to indicate that there is an aspect to God's presence that is distinct from His omnipresence - a more immediate or manifest presence, something that is perceptible and tangible.

One such occasion is found in Exodus 33:14-16. In this passage Moses is interceding with God on behalf of Israel. This conversation is a direct result of the construction of the Golden Calf idol in Exodus 32. As a result of Israel's idolatry God will not accompany Israel to the promised land (Ex. 33:3) but has promised to instead send an angel to guide them on their journey (Ex. 32:34 and Ex. 33:2).

Moses, unwilling to proceed with the journey without God's presence intercedes. The following interaction is recorded<sup>1</sup>:

Exodus 33:14-16 New American Standard Bible

And [God] said, "My **presence** shall go with you, and I will give you rest." Then [Moses] said to [God], "If Your **presence** does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the **face** of the earth?"

Exodus 33:14-16 New Revised Standard Version

[God] said, "My **presence** will go with you, and I will give you rest." And [Moses] said to [God], "If your **presence** will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the **face** of the earth."

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<sup>1</sup> Words in **bold** represent the Hebrew term in question, פְּנִיָּה

Exodus 33:14-16 New Jewish Publication Society Translation

And [God] said, “I will **go in the lead** and will lighten your burden.” And [Moses] said to [God], “Unless you **go in the lead**, do not make us leave this place. For how shall it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You go with us, so that we may be distinguished, Your people and I, from every people on the **face** of the earth?”

Exodus 33:14-16 English Standard Version

And [God] said “My **presence** will go with you and I will give you rest.” And [Moses] said to [God], “If your **presence** will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the **face** of the earth?”<sup>2</sup>

Moses’ concept of the Divine Presence is complex in this passage. Moses neither assumes nor questions the omnipresence of God in his intercession - he simply identifies it as one of the primary distinctives of the Hebrew people and does not take it for granted.

In three of the translations provided (NASB, NRSV and ESV), the Hebrew noun פָּנָי (paw-nay) is translated first as “presence” in verses 14 and 15 and later as “face” in verse 16 (perhaps a pun is in play?). In the NRSV the noun is translated “go in the lead,” essentially translating the noun as an action, in verses 14 and 15. This Hebrew term פָּנָי can have several meanings. According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, this term refers to:

1) face, faces 2) presence, person 3) face (of seraphim or cherubim) 4) face (of animals) 5) face, surface (of ground) 6) as adv of loc/temp: before and behind, toward, in front of, forward, formerly, from beforetime, before 7) with prep: in front of, before, to the front of, in the presence of, in the face of, at the face or front of, from the presence of, from before, from before the face of<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Brackets mine

<sup>3</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1996) 815-819

In addition, the Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance provides the following definition: “Face; by extension: appearance, presence; (pp.) before, in front of, in the presence of; to ‘show one's face’ is a sign of favor; to ‘turn’ or ‘hide one’s face’ is a sign of rejection...”<sup>4</sup>

This term has broad usage in the Hebrew Bible, being used in nearly 1,745 verses. It is first used to refer to the surface of the waters (Gen. 1:2), the expanse of the heavens (Gen. 1:20) and the surface of the earth (Gen. 1:29, 2:6). In most cases where the term refers to creation it is used to denote that part that is visible or perceived, the part of the water, sky and earth that can be viewed - not the depths or the heights, but the surface - the seen, not the unseen.

The term is used in 38 of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible. Obadiah is the only book that does not use the term at all. The first time that this term is applied to God is in Genesis 3:8 when Adam and Eve “hid themselves from the פָּנָי/presence of the Lord.” Later, when King David penned Psalm 51 on the occasion of being confronted by Nathan the Prophet regarding his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12), he makes the request; “Do not cast me away from your פָּנָי /presence...”. In Psalm 27:8 David writes; “When you said, ‘Seek my פָּנָי/face,’ my heart said to You, “Your פָּנָי/face, O Lord, I shall seek.” The implication of this passage is that God’s presence is something that can and should be “sought”. The author of Job uses the term when he writes that “Satan departed from the presence of the Lord” (Job 1:12, 2:7). In these cases Moses (the presumed author of Genesis), David and the author of Job all refer to God’s presence in similar terms that were used in Exodus. They neither assume it nor question it, they simply value it and don’t take it for granted, even exerting effort to experience it.

How did Adam and Eve hide from the presence of an all-present being? Why did Moses entreat the presence of an all-present God? Further, why did Moses understand God’s presence

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<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Goodrick, John R. Kohlenberger and James A. Swanson, *Zondervan NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999) 7128

as something that could “go” and why did Moses think that God’s presence would distinguish Israel from all the other nations? How can omnipresence make any people distinct from anyone else? Doesn’t everyone experience the omnipresence of God? Why was David commanded/invited to seek God’s presence?

When the term פָּנָי is applied to deity it is in terms of perceived relational proximity or intimacy. This is a fascinating way to think about a being that is all-present. The term, when defined, can mean “face, appearance, surface.” When it is applied to creation it refers to that portion of creation that can be viewed, seen or perceived. If the same principle is used when the term is applied to God, it would refer to that which can be viewed, seen or perceived - a manifestation of God’s immediate presence.

It appears then, that Adam and Eve were not trying to hide from God’s omnipresence, but from the perceptible manifestation of His immediate presence. Moses was not concerned with the loss of God’s omnipresence, but the loss of God’s immediate, perceptible, visible presence. It was not God’s omnipresence that distinguished Israel from the other peoples of the earth, it was the unique expressions, demonstrations and manifestations of His presence that set Israel apart. David was not afraid that God’s omnipresence would depart from him, but that the tangible, relational, perceptible aspect of God’s nearness and relational proximity and intimacy would leave him.

For the modern reader there are several implications. While God’s omnipresence is a real concept in the scriptures and one that can confidently be trusted in, perceptible manifestations of His immediate presence should not be assumed or taken for granted.

Adam and Eve hid from the manifestation of God’s presence. Is it possible that we can hide from the manifestation of God’s presence? David was invited to “seek” the immediate

manifestation of God's presence. Should we respond likewise to God's invitation to seek God's presence? How is this different from appreciating His omnipresence? Moses was unwilling to continue on his journey with Israel unless there was a promise of the manifestation of God's presence to accompany him. Moses also understood the manifestation of God's presence as the primary distinctive mark of His favor on the people of Israel. Would we be well served to value the immediate and tangible manifestation of God's presence on our journeys and to view it as the primary identifying mark of a follower of God?

Questions like these may cause modern readers and followers of God to pause and consider how God can be discerned, experienced and perceived. It may even provoke greater sensitivity to the manifestation of God's immediate presence that corresponds to the awareness that Adam, Eve, Moses, David and others shared. An awareness of His presence and a value for His face would more closely align us with the experiences recounted in the Hebrew Bible.

## **Works Cited**

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