

November 14, 2021

“Appearance - The Who and the What of an ESE” - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Numbers 22; Luke 1

Last week, we talked about the Set and Setting of an Extraordinary Spiritual Experience. Where things occur and when they happen are extremely important when we talk about ESEs. The other word for Set and Setting is ‘context’. The context of any given experience or event makes all kinds of difference in how we understand and interpret what we are reading, what is happening, and how we remember things.

This week, we are looking at the next quality of an ESE, which is the Appearance of a Who or a What. When I say appearance, I suspect many of us first think of a person like being or an animal, perhaps. But the Appearance aspect of an ESE can include such things as body symptoms, seeing things at the edge of our vision, time distortions, the sense that the world is tilting 3.14 degrees to the left. It just so happens that our ESEs in our readings today happen to be angels, a kind of divine being. There can also be what are called discarnate entities, meaning something like spirits or ghosts. If things really bend weird for you in an ESE, you might encounter what are called ‘self-transforming machine elves’. In the Appearance aspect of an ESE, we can also have strange time shifts, alterations of the environment, unusual body sensations, geometric shapes, multi-dimensional spaces and shapes (Kluver form constants), alternate time-lines, and other anomalies.

When strange beings or experiences show up, it is very difficult to understand what exactly is going on, or what the meaning might be. This is not the time to try to make meaning of the experience. Sometimes, in an ESE, all we get is an Appearance. There is no Revelation, and our Disclosures, our attempts to make meaning of the experience, only lead to more confusion and meaninglessness. A lot of ESEs we hear about do not move beyond the Appearance aspect of an ESE. The experience may be Extraordinary, but it might not be identifiably Spiritual in any way.

As an example, on November 15, 1966, a couple was driving along the road in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. The driver glanced over and saw a black shape flying alongside the car. He yelled and his partner also looked over, seeing a black shape with wings and glowing red eyes flying beside the car. They sped up to try to get away but the creature kept up with them. If this were just one couple to see something like this, well, you could chalk it up to some sort of hoax or combined vision. But later on the same day, another couple also encountered the creature. They described it like a giant moth with the limbs of a human. Thus was the creature dubbed by the newspaper in Point Pleasant, “MothMan”. The appearance of the creature defied explanation.

The story gets weirder. Over the course of the next year, there were more sightings of the MothMan. Sometimes, these sightings were combined with premonitions of a disaster that was forthcoming. These premonitions came to a culmination on December 15, 1967, when the Silver Bridge, which connects Point Pleasant, West Virginia, to Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed during rush hour traffic. 46 people died in the bridge collapse. The Silver Bridge collapsed because a single eye-bar failed. There were no redundancies in the bridge design, so one single failure of a primary connection meant the whole bridge was imperiled. It was also the end of sightings of the MothMan.

I highly recommend the book, *The Mothman Prophecies* by John Keel. John Keel is a researcher of weird and wonderful stories, and this one is at the top of his list. Keel ties this story into fairy stories from the Middle Ages and other cultures with unusual beings. Often, these beings are kinds of warning

signals for an impending disaster. Was the MothMan trying to warn the town of Point Pleasant? Or was the weird appearance of the creature just a coincidental experience that ended because people's attention was now on a monstrous human disaster?

An ESE is made extraordinary because the event transcends the ordinary. In Scripture, we are dealing with encounters with the Divine God of our faith and God's holy messengers, angels, or with the demonic, agents of chaos and evil, as in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The identity of the being(s) encountered may not be revealed immediately in the ESE. This is why Appearance is separated from Revelation, the aspect of an ESE where some message is transmitted, though sometimes the Appearance and the Revelation occur simultaneously. I use Appearance here to mean anything that shows up that does not yet have meaning or understanding to establish the origin or purpose of the Appearance. Once meaning and understanding of purpose are presented, the Appearance becomes Revelation, which we will discuss next week.

The Prophet Ezekiel, for instance, begins his ministry with an amazing ESE. He does not really understand what is appearing to him and uses the phrase "in the likeness of" several times. Because an ESE is often presenting something to us that is either not of our experience or not of this world, we can only say it is like something we already know. Listen to this part of Ezekiel's ESE:

*And above the expanse over their heads there was **the likeness** of a throne, 'in appearance like sapphire; and seated above **the likeness** of a throne was **a likeness** with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were <sup>x</sup>gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and <sup>y</sup>there was brightness around him.<sup>8</sup> Like the appearance of <sup>z</sup>the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.*

*Such was **the appearance of the likeness** of <sup>a</sup>the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, <sup>b</sup>I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. (Ez 1:26-28)*

Ezekiel seems to not know that he is encountering a vision of the Lord until he perceives a "likeness of a bow on a rainy day. This was the **appearance of the likeness** of the glory of the Lord" (Ez 1:28). The Appearance of the Lord in Ezekiel is continually referred to as *likeness*. This Hebraism of doubling "appearance", which is stated 7 times in just these few verses, with "likeness", which is stated 3 times, is a clue that we are dealing with a powerful ESE.

With Mary's ESE, we are told by Luke that the angel showing up is the Angel Gabriel. Gabri-el is translated as "God's Hero". In the Jewish tradition, the angel Gabriel is the angel assigned to communicate God's judgment and wrath to humanity. Mary never acknowledges that this is Gabriel. I suspect that Luke, who is influenced by both the Judaism of his day and also the Greek influences in Israel at the time, is saying something significant about the nature of Jesus' presence among us. The Gospel of John suggests in several places that the mere presence of Jesus in the world is a judgment upon the world.

The angel Gabriel, the angel Michael, and Satan are the only named angels in all of Scripture. Micha-el means "Who Is Like God" and was considered to be the angel assigned to communicate God's lovingkindness to the world. In terms of an ESE, this story tells us that who or what is showing up is

really important. It is also important to read the story or reflect on your own ESE closely. Do we really know who or what is showing up? Does Mary know in our story today? It seems she knows it is an angel appearing to her. They are hard to miss, I would think. According to Ezekiel, angels are glowing, fearsome creatures with four faces--one like a human, one like a lion, one like an ox, and one like an eagle--and four wings, under which there are many hands. They arrive on huge spinning disks. This is not a normal occurrence, either for Ezekiel or Mary.

The angel that shows up in Balaam's story does not even appear to Balaam. It appears to the donkey Balaam is riding, or rather, the donkey is the only being in the story thus far who can see the angel. *Balaam's donkey is having an ESE*. This angel holds a sword, just as the angel at the gate of the Garden of Eden holds a flaming sword.

*He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the 'cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen 1:24)*

The angel at the gates of Eden is said to be Uri-el, which means "the flame of God". Is this Uriel showing up to the donkey? Perhaps. Fortunately, as we will find out next week, our donkey talks.

(As an aside, notice that the names of angels almost always end in "-el", which means "God", or "of God". Perhaps you have heard the name "Kal-el", pronounced "Kohl-el". This means "The voice of God". It is also Superman's name on his home planet of Krypton.)

The important thing about this aspect of the ESE, the Appearance stage, is that we really don't know what is going to happen. Meaning cannot be made from beings or things merely showing up. All we know is that who or what is showing up is radically different from our normal day to day world. It is extraordinary, beyond our normal experience. These things happen and we ask, like Mary, "What does this mean?"

Remember, the Appearance stage may not be an entity. It could be an experience, such as the sense of lost time that sometimes occurs after a person has been abducted by fairies<sup>1</sup>. It is said, in WY Evans-Wentz's great book which collects fairy stories from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, that a couple hours passed in the fairy realm is years in the human realm. This is what I mean by lost time. It is not a coincidence that lost time is also the experience of UFO abductees. Often, the appearance of time differentials is a precursor to the remembering of the ESE itself, if one has forgotten the experience out of shock or trauma.

The Appearance may be associated with a discontinuous experience related to the times themselves. In other words, we may see things that are out of time with the time we are living in. In 1928, there was a multiple witness experience at the opening of Charlie Chaplin's movie, *The Circus*. Outside the theater, an unusual looking woman walked by, dressed unusually and acting strangely. The bizarre act she was participating in was loudly speaking into a handheld device that appeared to answer back when she spoke. To the witnesses, it appeared to be a kind of telephone, unattached by wires.<sup>2</sup> Where was she from? Perhaps, rather than from a "Where", she was from a "When".

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<sup>1</sup> Evans-Wentz, WY, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1966. 470.

<sup>2</sup> Braschler, Von, *Time Shifts: Experiences of Slipping into the Past and the Future*, Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2021. Position 6.22

The Appearance aspect is often the most compelling part of an ESE. The bizarre and strange can stand on its own without explanation since it is so completely different from our lived experience. If the Appearance occurs without Revelation, the Appearance stands as an anomaly in our understanding of the workings of the universe. The Appearance, on its own, provides breadcrumbs into the maze of the weird and bizarre. It also points us more deeply into what my friend and author JF Martel calls “the weird miracle of experience itself.”

The Appearance stage is simply the showing up of the entity or experience. There may or may not be any ability to know who or what is being encountered in the ESE, and all the experiencer may know at this point is that something beyond the ordinary is happening. We don’t even know if this will be a spiritual event yet. All Mary knows when the angel Gabriel shows up is that an angel has shown up. Things get even stranger when the angel starts speaking. People throughout history have understood the strangeness of this event. Look at the picture on your bulletin cover this morning. What is happening to Mary? What is the beam entering into her ear coming from? Why is the beam entering her ear?

Often, the gathering of angels was depicted as a cloud in medieval art. But that cloud in this picture sure looks familiar to us modern people who have been soaked in UFO stories for about 70 years now. And why would the beam of what -- light? lasers?-- be shooting into her ear? Well, perhaps that is because creation comes by sound, not by sight. As Paul says, *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ* (Rom 10:17). Remember that the creation of the universe in Genesis is by sound, the Kal-el, the voice of God. Hearing is the pathway of faith. Seeing is the confirmation of what we have heard. Therefore, hearing is the most trustworthy sense, not sight.

So many of us, myself included, walk around with a preconceived idea of what our faith lives mean and what kind of world we live in. We expect an ordered universe because we have been taught it is a created universe, and created things, especially by a loving, personal, and all-powerful God, are generally ordered things. The events and living things in our lives and world appear to have a discernible repeatable pattern. There is a cause and effect.  $A+B=C$ . Except when it doesn’t. And the “when it doesn’t” happens way more often than most of us would like. We don’t deal with disorder well, as the last year and a half has shown.

In this moment of Appearance, where we really do not understand what is happening and nor do we have any meaning to place on what is showing up yet, what is important is that, in both the story of Balaam’s donkey and Mary, God’s agents and messengers are showing up. God shows up. The agents of God appear. As one commentator says about Balaam’s ESE, “*Balaam finds that this God can send angels upon God’s errands, that there is no escape from His presence nor evasion from His will*”.<sup>3</sup> God is present and showing up even in the things we do not understand. Both these stories press us deeply into the mysteries of creation itself. There is so much we do not know, and so much beyond our perception and meaning-making and experience.

Can we make room for not knowing and not understanding? Because in our stories today, making room for the Appearance of beings and things and experiences means making room for the messengers of God to appear to us.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Robert A Watson, MA, DD, *An Exposition of the Bible: The Book of Numbers*, Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Company, 1914, 473.