

SAINT CHAVARA AS NEW MOSES: THE LONGING TO SEE GOD IN *ATMANUTAPAM* AND THE FULFILMENT OF THE DESIRE OF MOSES

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Abstract: This article examines the theme of the longing to behold God, drawing from Moses' plea in Exodus 33 and its fulfilment in the Transfiguration. It draws parallels with Chavara's poem *Atmanutapam*, highlighting how this longing is satisfied through the Incarnation, compunction, and contemplative prayer. Chavara is presented as a new Moses, leading the Indian Church and consequentially the universal Church toward a deeper encounter with Christ's mercy.

Keywords: Chavara, New Moses, Compunction, *Atmanutapam*, Biblical Spirituality, Hebrew Bible, Exodus, Vision of God, *Penthos*

1. Introduction

In the vast collection of sacred writings, few expressions of human yearning stand out like the bold plea of Moses in the Book of Exodus, where he asks the Lord with deep closeness, "Show me your glory" (Ex 33:18). This request emerges from an experience of true friendship with God, as the sacred text describes their conversations as occurring "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Ex 33:11), yet even such intimacy leaves Moses desiring more - a clear and direct vision of God's true face. The desire arises from experiences

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of God's guidance through challenging circumstances, such as leading the Israelites out of Egypt, providing manna from heaven and water from a rock, and establishing a covenant at Sinai. However, it reveals a profound hunger for revelation beyond those manifestations of divine care. Many centuries later, in a different part of the world within the Church in southern India, a similar expression appears in the contemplative poem titled *Atmanutapam*, or "Compunction of Heart," by Kuriakose Elias Chavara. In this work, Chavara repeatedly says to the Lord: "I long to see You." This expression does not merely reflect on ancient biblical narratives; it constitutes a genuine, persistent aspiration to gaze upon "The Lord of mercy, the Son of God... His glorious splendour, I long to see" (III, 1-2). For Chavara, this aspiration to see forms the core of his spiritual life, fostering a personal closeness to God.¹

This article suggests that the biblical spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara gains deeper insight when connected to Moses' aspiration in Exodus 33 and its realization in the New Testament account of the Transfiguration, as narrated in Matthew (17:1-8), Mark (9:2-8), and Luke (9:28-36). In this progression, Moses, who beheld only God's "back" while sheltered in a rock (Ex 33:23), later appears on Mount Tabor, witnessing the radiant glory of the transfigured Jesus alongside Elijah. This moment becomes even more significant when it is taken into consideration that Moses himself was not allowed to enter the Promised Land as he died on the other side of Jordan, but in the episode of transfiguration he is seen on Mount Tabor in the Promised Land, along with Jesus. What the Hebrew Bible deferred finds completion in Jesus, the Incarnate Word. Similarly, Chavara's earnest aspiration "to see" does not remain unfulfilled; it advances toward resolution through the saint's deep experience of the mystery of Incarnation and the depths of his interior prayer. In his poetic compositions, the God whom Moses could not fully behold becomes approachable in Jesus, whom Chavara reveres as "Mercy Incarnate."² Thus, Chavara emerges as a modern parallel to Moses for the Church in India: a figure who, having glimpsed divine glory in Christ, guides others toward participation in that contemplative vision.³

¹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Atmanutapam: Compunction of Heart*, trans. Valliyamthadathil Joseph (Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1985), 45.

² Joy Philip Kakkanatt, "Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Vision and Mission: Biblical Foundations," in Naiju Jose Kalambukattu (ed.), *Spiritual Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 19; Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2025), 93-111.

³ Thomas Panthaplackal, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Biblical Spirituality* (Kottayam: Denha Services, 2004), 112.

The Sacred Scripture serves not merely as a compendium of precepts or historical accounts, but as a narrative of divine outreach, inviting humanity into authentic relationship. The account of Moses in Exodus exemplifies this invitation. His existence encompassed numerous profound encounters with God - from the burning bush where God summoned him and disclosed His name, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14), to the miracles that liberated the people from bondage. Yet, despite these events, Moses sought greater intimacy. He desired to comprehend God not merely through deeds or utterances, but in His essential being. This aspiration mirrors an innate human inclination toward the divine, as articulated in the Psalms: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God" (Ps 42:1). Theological discourse often addresses this as the "beatific vision," the supreme joy of beholding God as He is, yet Moses' entreaty demonstrates that such pursuit commences in earthly existence, within the routine of everyday faith experience. Chavara assimilates this theme into his compositions, integrating it into his prayer practice. His poem *Atmanutapam* transcends dry doctrine; it represents a sincere invocation that is like the prayer of Moses, while directing attention to Jesus as the mediator of divine vision. As John's Gospel says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (Jn 1:18). This connection unites the Hebrew Bible's yearning with its culmination in Christ.⁴

2. Moses' Longing to See the Lord in Exodus 33

The context of Exodus 33 unfolds amid considerable tension and drama. The Israelites had recently deviated from fidelity to God by fashioning the golden calf, an act of profound disloyalty that nearly severed their covenantal bond (Ex 32:1-35). Following this transgression, Moses intervenes on behalf of the people, seeking not only pardon but also renewed confirmation of God's presence among them, as he implores, "If I have found favour with you, please show me your ways so I may know you" (Ex 33:13). This plea builds upon prior demonstrations of divine power, such as the ten plagues inflicted upon Egypt or the parting of the Red Sea (Ex 14:21-31). Moses does not inquire from a position of scepticism; rather, he presses further due to the established rapport. He then advances his request: "Show me your glory" (Ex 33:18). God responds with benevolence yet establishes boundaries, declaring, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you" (Ex 33:19), while also affirming, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 923-925.

me and live" (Ex 33:20). To safeguard Moses, God positions him in a rock cleft and permits only a view of the "back" as He passes (Ex 33:21–23). This limited revelation underscores a fundamental biblical principle: God remains proximate and compassionate, as evidenced by the guiding pillar of cloud and fire (Ex 13:21–22), yet transcends full human comprehension, as illustrated by the enveloping smoke on Sinai (Ex 19:18).⁵ From the part of Moses, this restricted vision of the Divine becomes a proleptic indication to his future: that he will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land.

This episode establishes Moses as an exemplar of one who profoundly encounters God yet recognizes the existence of further depths. His countenance radiated after communion with God (Ex 34:29–30), signifying that proximity, but it also serves as a reminder that earthly knowledge resembles viewing through a dim mirror, as Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known". Theologically, this narrative addresses God's transcendence, His supremacy, His immanence, and His nearness. In the Hebrew Bible, divine mercy manifests through responses to cries from the burning bush (Ex 3:7–8) and provisions in the wilderness (Ex 16:4–15), yet God's complete essence remains veiled to shield humanity from overwhelming holiness. The story of Moses instructs that faith involves an interplay between revelation and concealment, cultivating trust and aspiration toward God. It parallels the psalmist's lament, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps 42:2). Such yearning does not constitute an obstacle; it propels the soul toward greater union.⁶

Exodus 33 can be interpreted as an illustration of divine engagement with sin and grace. In the aftermath of the calf incident, God might have withdrawn, yet Moses' supplication elicits restoration. This echoes the later prophetic assertion in Isaiah, "In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them" (Isa 63:9). Such dynamics anticipate Christ, who fully discloses the Father's compassion. Chavara draws upon this motif in his spiritual reflections. His works exhibit a profound awareness of divine mercy amidst human frailty (as he calls Jesus *kaarunyaroopan* = mercy incarnate), akin to Moses' advocacy. In *Atmanutapam*, Chavara's sense

⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 301–304.

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 645–650.

of compunction - sorrow for sin - propels a heightened aspiration to behold God, paralleling Moses' own inner journey from adversity to intimacy.⁷

3. The Fulfilment of Moses' Longing

In the New Testament, the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor provides a luminous resolution to this ancient aspiration, transforming the restricted visions of the Old Covenant into the plenary radiance of Christ. Jesus ascends the mountain with Peter, James, and John, and undergoes a metamorphosis: His face shines like the sun, His garments become dazzling white (Mt 17:2), evoking the luminescence that filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34-38). Subsequently, Moses and Elijah are seen conversing with Him, thereby linking the Law and the Prophets to Jesus, as He subsequently elucidates that all Scripture directs toward Him (Lk 24:27). This event directly addresses the limitations of Exodus 33 - Moses, denied a view of God's face, now perceives it incarnate in Jesus. The occasion follows Jesus' prediction of His passion (Mt 16:21-23), mirroring the post-calf plea of Moses, thus associating divine mercy with periods of trial. The voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my Son, whom I love; listen to him!" (Mt 17:5), resonating with the affirmation at His baptism (Mt 3:17).⁸ The same law-giver prophet Moses who lead the nation from the slavery of Egypt to the boarder of the Promised Land, but was denied entry there, is now found inside the Promised Land of God's presence, in the very presence of the incarnate Lord.

There are several dimensions to be considered within this inter-narrative connection. First, the glory inaccessible to Moses now resides in Christ's human form, extending an invitation rather than repulsion, as demonstrated in His miracles - converting water to wine at Cana (Jn 2:1-11) or nourishing multitudes (Mt 14:13-21) - which manifest divine benevolence in tangible ways. Second, the event affirms mercy's triumph over failure, foreshadowing the crucifixion where Jesus declares, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). Third, the Incarnation renders the invisible visible: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory" (Jn 1:14). This evolution permits participation in the erstwhile deferred aspiration, fortifying believers in the way as it strengthened the apostles. Theologically, it bridges the covenants. As Paul says, "We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his

⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 397-402.

⁸ Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, 47-50.

image" (2 Cor 3:18). The veiled countenance of Moses contrasts with the open access offered through Christ.⁹

The Transfiguration extends beyond a mere spectacle; it offers a foretaste of celestial reality. Elijah, ascended in a chariot (2 Kgs 2:11), and Moses, interred by God (Deut 34:6), symbolize mortality and immortality, both orienting toward resurrection. Their dialogue concerns Jesus' "departure" or exodus (Lk 9:31), making a parallel between Israel's liberation and humanity's redemption from sin via the cross. This realizes prophecies such as Malachi 4:5, dispatching Elijah prior to the day of the Lord. For the faithful, it signifies a personal metamorphosis: "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51). It provides encouragement amid affliction, assuring the forthcoming glory.¹⁰ Transfiguration is a moment of revelation of Christ's dual nature, divine and human, fulfilling the Hebrew Bible's anticipations. It underscores the continuity between Moses' partial vision and the full disclosure in Christ, inviting believers to a transformative encounter with the divine light.

4. The Echo of Mosaic Longing in Chavara's *Atmanutapam*

Within this scriptural framework, Chavara's *Atmanutapam* acquires enhanced depth. His recurrent plea "I long to see" bridges Moses' supplication with the realization of that desire at Tabor. Chavara writes: "The Lord of mercy, the Son of God / His glorious splendour, I long to see / The fountain of mercy, God Incarnate / Who, the ugly form of man assumed / To uproot him from the slush of sin / The Redeemer of humankind, I long to see" (III, 1-6). This centres on Christ who assumed humanity - born in a manger (Lk 2:7), baptized among sinners (Mt 3:13-17), tempted in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11) - to embody mercy. Chavara travels through numerous Gospel episodes: summoning disciples by the sea (Mt 4:18-22), the matrimonial miracle at Cana (Jn 2:1-11), proclaiming Himself the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11-18). Each episode functions as an emblem of divine affection, helping us to recognize the Gospel passages as avenues for encounter with the Divine.¹¹

In the appendix to Poem III, Chavara intensifies this emphasis: "Merciful Lord, Son of almighty God / O that I may see! / Sea of Mercy, seat of

⁹ Panthaplackal, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 135-137.

¹⁰ James Kalarickal, *The Spirituality of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2012), 89.

¹¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 240-242.

Compassion / Who effaced the stain of Sin / Who the imprisoned souls redeemed / O that I may see! / O source of all treasure, your eminence debased / From misery to save me." This accentuates salvation through Christ's ordeal - His crucifixion (Mt 27:32-56), resurrection (Mt 28:1-10) - an act of liberation like that of the Exodus (Ex 12-14). Beholding God involves perceiving this mercy, as in restoring the afflicted (Mt 8:1-4) or absolving transgressions (Jn 8:1-11). It actualizes the promise: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8).¹²

Chavara's poetic prayer aligns with the biblical path: commencing with the aspiration of Moses in Exodus 33, proceeding through divine incarnation in John 1:14, culminating in glory in Matthew 17, and thereby encouraging a deep and experiential encounter with the Lord. Emerging from this encounter, his spirituality combines mysticism and praxis, exemplified in establishing educational institutions and aiding the destitute, manifesting faith through actions (James 2:14-17).¹³ Scholarly examinations of Chavara's works highlight the integration of biblical motifs with social reform, underscoring his role in fostering spiritual and communal renewal.¹⁴

5. Encountering the Incarnate Jesus as Fulfilling the Longing

The title *Atmanutapam*, or "Compunction of Heart," indicates that repentance constitutes an essential prerequisite for the vision of the Divine. Such perception is granted to the humble, not to the arrogant. Moses prayed to the Lord following the episode of the great sin of the golden calf (Ex 32:30-32), echoing the psalm: "Create in me a pure heart" (Ps 51:10). Chavara's remorse serves as a safeguard akin to the rock cleft, facilitating the reception of divine illumination, as "Blessed are those who mourn" (Mt 5:4). Interconnecting contrition, mercy, and contemplation, he parallels the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), where true repentance leads to the possibility of acceptance by the father. This sequence - acknowledgment of fault, acceptance of grace, contemplation of God - delineates the spiritual journey.¹⁵

¹² Francis Thonippara, *St. Chavara: The Reformer of Kerala Church* (Aluva: Chavara Central Secretariat, 1998), 156-160.

¹³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 685-690.

¹⁴ M. Scaria, "St. Chavara: A Harbinger of Human Dignity," Paper Publications.

¹⁵ Kalarickal, *The Spirituality of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 210.

Compunction in Chavara's composition resembles the patristic concept of "*penthos*," a sorrow that leads to joy.¹⁶ It goes beyond mere culpability, awakening to divine affection, as Paul notes, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor 7:10). For Chavara, this sentiment stimulates his poetry and his initiatives, advocating regular prayer and deep engagement with the scripture.¹⁷ The Incarnation plays a pivotal role, because it is in the face of the Incarnate Jesus that Chavara contemplates the divine mercy. This renders divine mercy tangible and accessible, thus fulfilling through the recognition of Christ's redemptive presence the aspiration of Moses which re-appears in the poetic writings of Chavara.

6. Chavara as a New Moses and the Ultimate Fulfilment of His Desire

The interior aspect of Chavara's poetic prayer extends to his ecclesiastical leadership, aligning him with Moses, whose pursuit intertwined with communal guidance. Moses sought divine presence for the nation, navigating through the sea (Ex 14:21-31) toward the Promised Land (Ex 3:8). Amid nineteenth-century challenges in Kerala, Chavara's aspiration translated into collective endeavours - founding congregations, promoting education, and fostering unity. Analogous to Moses' tabernacle (Ex 25-31), he erected spiritual edifices and called the first monastery '*Bes Rauma*' (the exalted house), reminding the theophany on high mountains like Sinai.¹⁸ He embodied divine intimacy, intercession, penitence, and direction toward a personal encounter with Christ, meanwhile responding to the mandate to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).¹⁹

Chavara's spirituality of kenosis - self-abnegation mirroring Christ (Phil 2:5-8) - manifested in service to the marginalized. His texts advocate emulation of Jesus' humility, combining contemplation with benevolence, in response to the exhortation of Jesus, "Whatever you did for one of the least...

¹⁶ Geo Pallikunnel, "Eastern Christian Ascetic Ideal of 'Mourning' (Penthos) and the Atmanuthapam of Kuriakose Elias Chavara," in Naiju Jose Kalambukattu (ed.), *Spiritual Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 19; Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2025) 264-289.

¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 210-215.

¹⁸ Benny Thettayil, "Rising Mountains and Proximity to the Divine: Biblical Ideal of Bes-rauma," in Naiju Jose Kalambukattu (ed.), *Spiritual Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 19; Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2025), 34-92.

¹⁹ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 37-42.

you did for me” (Mt 25:40).²⁰ The fulfilment of Chavara’s aspiration occurs in his experience of the incarnation of Christ: the divine mystery narrated in the nativity (Lk 1:26–38), spiritually experienced in prayer where one may “taste and see” (Ps 34:8), and eschatologically hoped to be realized in eternity (1 Jn 3:2). His invocation embodies hope, sustained by resurrection manifestations (Jn 20–21) and Pentecostal outpouring (Acts 2:1–4).²¹

Chavara’s additional compositions, such as *Dhyanasallapangal*, express deep meditative dialogues with God, which enriched his spiritual vision. His testament advocates familial scriptural study, transforming households into sanctuaries in accordance with the instruction of Moses (Deut 6:6–9).²² In this way, our brief analysis of Chavara’s contributions underscores his synthesis of mystical and missionary elements, drawing from biblical foundations to effect societal transformation.²³

7. Conclusion

From the shadows of Sinai to the illumination of Tabor, and through the contemplative depths of Chavara, the aspiration to behold God persists as a central motif in the narrative of faith. Moses’ request, partially granted under the Old Covenant, attained its full realization only in Christ, who unveiled the divine countenance through gestures such as foot-washing (Jn 13:1–17) and breaking of the bread at Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35). Chavara perpetuated this heritage; *Atmanutapam* took forward the prayer of Moses within the context of 18th century Kerala Church. In perceiving Christ as Incarnate Mercy, Chavara attained what Moses sought, extending an invitation to all generations and to all of us to ascend a renewed Tabor and encounter divine compassion. His spirituality distills to a process: contrition that evolves into contemplation, deep longing that discovers genuine joy in divine mercy. “O that I may see!” – the plea of Moses, of Chavara, and of every soul oriented toward the vision of the Divine – is realized in God’s encompassing and merciful gaze.²⁴

²⁰ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, Anchor Bible, vol. 28A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 798–803.

²¹ Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, appendix, 65–67.

²² Paul Kalluveetil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint* (Kochi: Chavara Institute, 2015), 78–82.

²³ Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, “Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara Biblical Musings,” *Herald of the East* 16, no. 2 (2024): 143–149.

²⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 595–600.