

# "But Now Mine Eye Seeth Thee"

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COMMUNICATION to and from the unseen world is customarily described in terms of sense-perception. Of the five senses, two (taste and smell) are of little account in our religious tradition, while a third (feeling) is of special interest in our understanding of ecstasy and mysticism. But in the Bible revelation usually and customarily comes by word and by vision, the recipient being said to "hear" and to "see." This paper addresses itself to the influential thesis of Thorlief Boman,<sup>1</sup> a thesis clearly summarized twice towards the end of his book *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*:

. . . Most of the Greek words for knowing and knowledge are related to the visual faculty. . . . Gunnar Rudberg says of Plato that he "is a man of sight, of seeing. His thinking is a thinking with the eyes, proceeding from what is seen. . . ." Quite as decided in the Old Testament is the emphasis upon the significance of *hearing* and of the *word in its being spoken*. . . .<sup>2</sup>

. . . For the Hebrew the most important of his senses for the experience of truth was his hearing (as well as various kinds of feeling), but for the Greek it had to be his sight; or perhaps inversely, because the Greeks were organized in a predominantly visual way and the Hebrews in a predominantly auditory way, each people's conception of truth was formed in increasingly different ways.<sup>3</sup>

Boman relates this phenomenon to the Greek conception of reality as *being*, the Hebrew as *movement*.<sup>4</sup>

It is our contention here that this thesis simplifies and organizes the data involved in a manner that does not do justice to the complexity of the relevant phenomena and that, moreover, the biblical record not only makes much of vision but, in fact, seems often to represent the visual experience

1. Boman's thesis has been subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Cf. p. 23: "It is this starting from the theoretical end, from the assurance of understanding the Hebrew mind, and working from there to its linguistic form, that causes the haphazardness of modern theological treatments of linguistic evidence. A person deeply conscious of the features of the Hebrew mind will notice some linguistic feature which illustrates it. He does not search about to see if there are other features which point in the opposite direction; and if there are still others which do not openly bear the stamp of the Hebrew mind, they are presumably 'neutral' facts which have nothing to say one way or the other. Thus, since a systematic examination or description of the language is not being done, a few phenomena which illustrate the theory seem to be striking confirmation of it, and what were occasional and possible illustrative examples come to appear as a total system corresponding to the realities of Hebrew thought. The theory thus becomes presumptive evidence for the interpretation of facts that are doubtful." The present essay is an attempt to "search about" in the manner demanded by Barr, in the case of words and expressions relating to the description of revelatory phenomena in terms of sense-perception.

2. T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), p. 201.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

as decisive: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee."

The difficulty involved in sorting out the sensual imagery used to depict revelation is admirably stated by Lindblom:

The prophets belong unmistakably to the "visionary type" of *homines religiosi*; of which we have countless examples in many different countries and periods. . . . The word "vision" suggests something that is literally shown and seen, whereas the content of a revelation may be apprehended by hearing, or may consist simply in thoughts and ideas which come into the mind of the inspired person. In the prophetic literature no definitive dividing-line is drawn between visions, auditions and inspired ideas in general.<sup>5</sup>

In 13:1, Job puts what he sees and what he hears in parallel lines and seems to make no distinction between them:

Lo, my eye has seen all this,  
My ear has heard and understood it.

In the prophetic oracular superscriptions, the two senses are often combined and confused:

The words of Amos . . . which he saw . . . [1:1].

The vision of Obadiah. . . .

Thus says the Lord . . . [1:1].

The word of the Lord that came to Micah . . . which he saw . . . [1:1].

An oracle concerning Nineveh.

The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh . . . [1:1].

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw . . . [1:1].

. . . The word of the Lord came to Zechariah . . . and Zechariah said, "I saw in the night, and behold . . ." [1:7, 8].

Although the initial superscription in Jeremiah is auditory, the prophet, in his first oracle after his call, uses the strange auditory-visual device of the prophetic pun: "And the word of the Lord came to me saying: 'Jeremiah, what do you see?' and I said, 'I see a rod of almond [*shāqēdh*].' Then the Lord said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am watching over [*shōqēdh*] my word to perform it'" (1:11, 12). Ezekiel, of course, abounds in the visual: "I saw visions of God . . ." (1:1 *et al.*).

In these passages the verb is usually *chāzā(h)*—or its corresponding noun *chāzôn* is found—although in the two most "visionary" cases (Zechariah and Ezekiel) the root *rā'ā(h)* is used.<sup>6</sup> The active participles of both of these verbs are often used for gifted persons in early Israel. That *words* are sometimes *seen*, as in Amos, indicates that *dābhār* sometimes involves more than merely auditory effects (the word for this is *qôl*), and may indicate *event* or even *thing*. It must be admitted that Hebrew visions are most probably always observations of persons and events, of action and interaction, rather than contemplations of being in itself.<sup>7</sup> This is probably true of visions and

5. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 108.

6. In the superscriptions not mentioned here, the formula almost always is: "and the word came [*wayehîl*]."

7. *Signs* were usually (Isa. 7:14), but not always, of a visual nature. This subject, not treated here, could open up my theme in a new direction that would substantiate my central contention.

theophanies everywhere, and is not necessarily a Hebraic peculiarity. The correct comparison is not with the Platonic vision but with visual and auditory phenomena in popular Greek religion—the Homeric hymns and the hero-god cults. This comparison is admittedly difficult because of the aniconic nature of the Hebrew cultus.

In Exodus 33:20 (J), we are told that to see the full face of Yahweh is to die; consequently, Moses is allowed to see only his back part (33:23). It is equally true that to hear the actual voice of God would normally be a fatal experience of the numinous (Deut. 4:33; 5:24). In both cases, revelation involves the gracious suspension of the numinal threat. There are two impressive early narratives (both J) that describe an appearance of Yahweh. In Genesis 18 Yahweh appears to Abraham “by the oaks of Mamre”—either in the guise of three men, or of one man with two attendants (we cannot be sure which). In this charmingly anthropomorphic tale, which reports the theophany that authenticates the Hebron shrine, the divine person is not described, and the conversation (which Sarah overhears and finds amusing) is important. In Exodus 24:9 it is simply stated that Moses and seventy-three others “saw the God of Israel,” a statement spiritualized by the horrified LXX translator into: “They saw the place where the God of Israel stood.” In this remarkable theophany there is no report of any verbal communication whatsoever: “And they beheld [*chāzā(h)*] God, and ate and drank” [LXX—“and they appeared in the place of God, and ate and drank”].<sup>8</sup>

When we come to the familiar account of the call of Isaiah, we have a remarkable blending of the visual and the auditory. The prophet says: “I saw the Lord” (*adhōnay*) (6:1), and this time the Greek translator does not draw back—*eidon ton Kurion*. It is because his “eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Hosts” (so also LXX) that Isaiah confesses his uncleanness and then the auditory part of the encounter is initiated. Here we come very close to a true vision of God in his essence and holiness; the only possible reaction is terrified withdrawal and the only utterance can be confession. In this chapter the visual and the auditory shade into one another, and in our memory of it just what Isaiah “saw” and what he “heard” and

8. M. L. Newman, *The People of the Covenant* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), makes an interesting distinction between the audible nature of the covenant revelation in the E tradition and its visual nature in the account of J. Cf. pp. 48f.: “Also unlike the E tradition, where the audible phenomena are as fully stressed as the visual, J’s emphasis is exclusively upon the latter. For J it is *seeing* that is paramount. Yahweh comes down upon Mount Sinai in the ‘*sight of all the people*’ (Ex. 19:11b). Moses asks to *see* the glory of Yahweh (33:18). When the covenant meal is eaten the leaders of the people *see* God (24:9, 11). There is no thunder in the J tradition; all the phenomena of the theophany are visual. Yahweh descends in ‘*fire*’ (19:18). The mountain is ‘*wrapped in smoke*’ and its smoke ‘*is like the smoke of a kiln*’ (19:18). Closely related to the smoke is the ‘*cloud*’ in which Yahweh is present (19:19a; 34:5). The ‘*glory*’ (*kabod*) of Yahweh which is manifested to Moses is also a visual phenomenon and in this tradition probably is to be associated with fire. Yahweh’s ‘*glory*’ is the bright, shining manifestation of his presence; it is his visible earthly form. In the E tradition the climactic cultic moment is the proclamation and hearing of Yahweh’s name. This element does appear in J (33:19; 34:6), but much more important is the manifestation and seeing of Yahweh’s glory.”

"said" are scarcely distinguishable. But I think it fair to say that, in the total impression, the visual overshadows the auditory.

Crucial passages in Job illustrate the importance of vision as the final verifying experience of communication and communion with God. This is clear even amid the textual perplexities of the *gô'el* passage. In his recent *Anchor Bible* commentary, Marvin H. Pope translates Job 19:25-27 as follows:

I know my vindicator lives  
 A guarantor upon the dust will stand [v. 25].  
 Even after my skin is flayed,  
 Without my flesh I shall see God [v. 26].  
 I will see him on my side,  
 My own eyes will see him unestranged.  
 My heart faints within me [v. 27].

In the first two occurrences here (26*b*, 27*a*), *see* translates *chāzā(h)*; in the last instance (27*b*) it stands for *rā'ā(h)*. In both cases a vision (whether eschatological or not) will be for Job the vindicating assurance of acceptance with God, whom Job must somehow *see*.

In chapter 23, Job again speaks with pathetic eloquence of his desire and need to come into close contact and fellowship with God. He asks to be allowed to plead his own case before the very seat of judgment. In the give-and-take of forensic debate, Job is confident of victory:

There an upright man could reason with him,  
 and I should be acquitted for ever by my judge [v. 7].

The subsequent verses make it plain that the vindicating experience must be visual as well as verbal; he must see God even as God sees him:<sup>9</sup>

Lo, I go forward, and he is not there;  
 Backward, and I cannot perceive him [v. 8];  
 Left I turn and cannot see [*chāzā[h]*] him,  
 I turn right and do not spy [*rā'ā[h]*] him [v. 9].

As we turn to the theophany, strangely so called when God does not seem to appear, we find that, for Job, sight is, once again, the verifying experience. As Pope translates our titular text:

I have heard of you by hearsay,  
 But now my own eyes have seen you [42:5].

These are strange words, coming after the long discourse when, as far as we can tell, Job does not "see" the Lord.

In what sense has Job "seen" God? Tur-Sinai's conjecture that an older version of the story related any more of God's appearance seems rather unlikely. We must assume that Job is now convinced of what he has doubted, viz. God's providential care. He has hoped for the assurance that God has been on his side and would vindicate him. This, he had insisted, xix: 23-7, must come somehow—if not during his life, then later. Now that God has spoken directly to him, Job's demands have been met.<sup>10</sup>

9. Translation by M. H. Pope, *The Anchor Bible: Job* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965), p. 154.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

This final experience, then, is described in terms of the visual. At the final moment of verification the Hebrew said, as we still say: "I see." Telephone company advertisements to the contrary, long distance (hearing) is no substitute for being there. The presence of an eye-witness of good character is the best possible evidence in criminal law. You may hear a report, but you hasten to see the event. Seeing vindicates hearing, which can be more readily gainsaid. As the author of Isaiah 53:1 sadly asks: "Who hath believed our report?"

This attitude seems to have been as widespread among the ancient Hebrews as it is among us. In Psalm 48:8 we find that sight removes the uncertainty of hearing: "As we have heard, so have we seen." And in 1 Kings 10:7 the queen of Sheba says to Solomon: "I did not believe the reports [*debhārīm*] until I came and my own eyes had seen it." It would seem that there is no special Hebrew peculiarity that replaces sight by hearing as the final verifying perception of truth, either in ordinary affairs or in religious experience.

The point is beautifully illustrated in the Lucan Christophany of the Emmaus road. Leaving aside the question of whether or not we have here passed from the Hebraic to the Hellenistic, let us look at this instructive narrative. The stranger joins the despondent pair, takes up their discussion, and leads them into deeper knowledge and insight. Their eyes are kept from recognizing him, yet their hearts burn with the fire of inspiration as they talk. The verifying experience, however, is visual, and it seems to be spontaneously induced by the performance of a meaningful and familiar symbolic act: "When he was at table with them, he took the bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight" (Luke 24:30f.).

It has not been our purpose here to belittle the significance of the *word* in the Hebrew apprehension of religious truth. The Hebrews were the people of the word, a tendency facilitated perhaps by the polemic and commandment against idolatry. But it seems to me that the Boman thesis does less than full justice to all the evidence. In the Delphic oracle, for instance, the communication from the other side is normally oral and poetic, and the theophanies rare. It is in this area of Greek religion—the hero-cults, the oracles, and the Homeric hymns—that we can most profitably make comparisons with the Hebrews. The Old Testament words were not for the gnostic and the spiritual, but for all the people; this cannot be said of the Platonic conceptions of truth and the epistemologies of vision.

Sense-perception is used to speak about revelation. Of the senses, "hearing" seems to be used most often by the Hebrews to signify communication from God. But "hearing" and "seeing" are often confused with one another and blend and shade into one another. With the Hebrews, as with the Greeks, and with us too, the final verifying apprehension of truth comes when one can say: I see. "I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee."