

## “Israel: The One Who Sees God”—Visualization of God in Biblical, Apocalyptic, and Rabbinic Sources

### AUDITORY VS. VISUAL MODES

One of the seminal problems in theology and religious philosophy is the possibility of a visionary experience of God. In the case of Jewish studies an analysis of this problem gains added significance, since it has been common for scholars to characterize Hebraic thought—especially in contrast to Greek thought—as essentially auditory and nonvisual in its orientation. The classical formulation of this distinction between the visual orientation of ancient Greek (pagan) culture and the auditory orientation of ancient Israelite (monotheistic) culture was given by the German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This distinction has been more systematically treated in this century by Thorlief Boman<sup>2</sup> and has been widely repeated by many scholars from various disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Two of the more recent exponents of this claim are Susan Handelman and José Faur, writers who have both attempted to apply the techniques and categories of contemporary literary criticism to rabbinic thought. Handelman writes, “Whereas for Jews, God manifested Himself through words in a divine text, for the Greeks theophany was visual, not verbal—a direct, immediate experience of the gods.”<sup>4</sup> Faur, for his part, expresses the same view as follows:

The Hebrew and Greek types of truth correspond to two different levels of reality. The Greek truth is visual. Therefore it is related to the spatial World-Out-There. For the Hebrews the highest form of truth is perceived at the auditory level . . . Verbal representation of God, even in anthropomorphic terms, is common both to Scripture and to the rabbis. What was offensive to the Hebrew was ‘to see’ God; that is, to express His reality at the visual level.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History*, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, pp. 68ff. and esp. 206–207.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 8–9; Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, pp. 179ff.; Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, pp. 10–11; M. Buber, *Darkho shel ha-Miqra* (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 41–58; Chidester, “Word against Light”; also the expanded discussion in idem, *Word and Light*, pp. 1–50. See also R. David ha-Cohen, *Qol ha-Nevu’ah* (Jerusalem, 1970), which is based entirely on this proposition. On the thesis of an inherent lack of visual talent amongst the Jews, see H. Howarth, “Jewish Art and the Fear of Images,” *Commentary* 9 (1950): 142–150.

<sup>4</sup> *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*, pp. 29–30.

There can be no doubt that the view that became normative in the history of Judaism is one that favored auditory over visual images. With very few exceptions Jews shunned the graphic representation of God, preferring language as the appropriate means to describe and characterize the divine nature. Even in the ancient world many outsiders were struck by the conspicuous fact that, especially in the area of worship, Judaism is a religion without images.<sup>6</sup> While the epistemic privileging of hearing over seeing in relation to God is attested in various biblical writers, including many of the classical prophets, the aversion to iconic representation of the deity can be traced most particularly to the Deuteronomist author who stressed that the essential and exclusive medium of revelation was the divine voice and not a visible form.<sup>7</sup> The Deuteronomist used this fact to support the commandment against making graven images,<sup>8</sup> a commandment found in the Decalogue<sup>9</sup> without any connection, however, to the theological claim that the Sinaitic theophany was strictly a matter of hearing and not seeing. Whatever the “original” rationale for the prohibition on the iconic representation of God in ancient Israelite culture, whether theological or socio-political,<sup>10</sup> it seems likely that the Deuteronomist restriction on the visualization of God is a later interpretation of an already existing proscription.

The underlying conceptual assumption here is clear enough: God possesses no visible form and therefore cannot be worshiped through created images. While the figural representation of the deity is deemed offensive or even blasphemous, the hearing of a voice is an acceptable form of anthropomorphic representation, for, phenomenologically speaking, the voice does not necessarily imply an externalized concrete shape that is bound by specific spatial dimensions.

The philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida has articulated, in an early work, the epistemological basis for the preference of auditory to visual forms—a preference, I might add, that represents an essential reversion of the dominant ocu-

<sup>6</sup> See Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.35, in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem, 1976), 1:299–300; and see p. 305 n. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Deut. 4:12, 15. See also Gutmann, “Deuteronomy.”

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 4:16–19. See the pertinent remarks of Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, p. 322 n. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Exod. 20:4, Deut. 5:8. See also the introductory remarks in the “Book of the Covenant” in Exod. 20:19–20, where the fact that YHWH speaks from heaven is offered as a rationale for the prohibition against making gods of gold and silver. This comment does not yet advance the Deuteronomist position that clearly links the prohibition of graven images to the fact that no visible form of God was seen. On the prohibition on depicting the deity in images, see also Exod. 34:17, Deut. 27:15.

<sup>10</sup> See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, pp. 405–408; Hendel, “The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel”; Barasch, *Icon*, pp. 13–22. And see Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book,” pp. 27–35; he proposes a connection between the prohibition against iconic representation of God in material or bodily form and Israel’s ambivalence toward the question of the gender and sexuality of the deity. Also relevant in this connection are the observations of Luce Irigaray in “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love,” trans. M. Whitford, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (Bloomington, 1991), esp. pp. 116–117.

larcentric trend in Western thinking.<sup>11</sup> Derrida writes that the phonic signs, or the voices that are heard,<sup>12</sup> "can only be expressed in an element whose phenomenality does not have worldly form."<sup>13</sup> The *phōnē* has a certain primacy and immediate presence in consciousness, for that which is heard, in contrast to the nonphonic (visual) signifier, transforms "the worldly opacity of its body into pure diaphaneity. This effacement of the sensible body and its exteriority is for consciousness the very form of the immediate presence of the signified."<sup>14</sup> Derrida's point is that for things that are heard, the exteriority of the phenomenon, its sense of being "outside" one's consciousness in bodily form, is reduced. The voice admits no spatial reference in the external world and is therefore presumed to be immediately present. The application of Derrida's comments is very helpful in understanding the ancient preference reflected in the Deuteronomic author: it is appropriate to speak of a voice of God rather than a visible form because the former implies a sense of phenomenological immediacy without necessitating spatial or worldly exteriority. Hence, representing God anthropomorphically in auditory imagery is not theologically offensive, for that mode of representation does not violate the basic principle of God's irreducible otherness. Indeed, it is alone the speech of God that bridges the gap separating humanity and the divine. Thus one finds a verbal/auditory emphasis affirmed in many prophetic revelations that conform to the Deuteronomic restriction on iconic representation yet preserve the lived immediacy of biblical religion. The logic entailed by this line of thinking is clearly drawn by the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig: "The ways of God are different from the ways of man, but the word of God and the word of man are the same. What man hears in his heart as his own human speech is the very word which comes out of God's mouth."<sup>15</sup> Only by virtue of language can one speak of any resemblance linking humanity and God, and on account of that resemblance one can continue to speak in a religiously significant and vital way of God's mouth and the word that comes therefrom. Anthropomorphic expression can be appropriated as a meaningful mode of discourse if it is circumscribed within

<sup>11</sup> On the ocularcentrism in Western culture, see Jonas, "The Nobility of Sight." See also the collection of essays in Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*; Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 21–82.

<sup>12</sup> The original French reads *entendus*, which implies both "heard" and "understood."

<sup>13</sup> *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77. See, however, Chidester (*Word and Light*, pp. 12–13), who explains Derrida's insistence on difference and absence in verbal communication—spoken or written—in terms of the distinction between the immediate and continuous presence of visual communication, on one hand, and the mediate, indirect, discontinuous nature of verbal communication, on the other. As the author demonstrates, the characterization of visual perception as immediate and verbal (auditory) as mediate is quite widespread in Western philosophy; hence the approach I have taken with respect to the biblical materials represents a significant departure.

<sup>15</sup> *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. W. Hallo (New York, 1970), p. 151. Cf. N. N. Glatzer, "The Concept of Language in Rosenzweig's Thought," in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr (Hanover, 1988), pp. 172–178, esp. 176; Y. Kornberg Greenberg, "A Jewish Postmodern Critique of Rosenzweig's Speech Thinking and the Conception of Revelation," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 no. 1 (1992): 63–76, esp. 68–70.

a linguistic field.<sup>16</sup> That one has heard the voice of God is not nearly as crude an anthropomorphism as the claim that one has seen, let alone kissed, the mouth of God.<sup>17</sup>

### ANTHROPOMORPHISM, THEOMORPHISM, AND THE VISIBILITY OF GOD

Other biblical writers took for granted the possibility of the manifestation of God in one visible form or another, even though no archaeological evidence has surfaced to indicate that these visualizations resulted in the production of material images.<sup>18</sup> The personalist element in biblical thinking, as in other theistic religions, remains, as R. J. Zwi Werblowsky has aptly put it, “an irreducible anthropomorphism.”<sup>19</sup> “The ultimate residual anthropomorphism . . . is the theistic notion of God as personal, in contrast to an impersonal conception of the divine.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this conception of personhood endows the biblical God with a human form that can be, and in fact is, manifest in specifically visual terms. Indeed, it has been argued that the manifestations of God in the biblical period primarily took the form of anthropomorphic theophanies—that is, YHWH was seen almost exclusively in the form of an anthropos.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> It must be noted that Rosenzweig accorded legitimacy to anthropomorphisms from another perspective, viz., anthropomorphic characterizations do not describe God’s essence but rather the encounter or relation between God and human. Cf. Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 167–181, and see B. Galli, “Rosenzweig Speaking of Meetings and Monotheism in Biblical Anthropomorphisms,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 no. 2 (1993): 219–243. See also S. Mosès, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. C. Tihanyi (Detroit, 1992), pp. 283–286; Mosès notes that the need for anthropomorphism is expressed in Rosenzweig especially in relation to the vision of the divine face through a human face, an idea that resonates with classical theosophic kabbalah. For the possible affinity of Rosenzweig’s approach to kabbalistic sources, see M. Idel, “Franz Rosenzweig and the Kabbalah,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, pp. 162–171.

<sup>17</sup> One could, of course, argue, as Henri Atlan put it, that the theistic fight against idolatry entails the paradoxical situation that the only discourse about God that is not idolatrous—i.e., does not turn the divine into a fixed object—is atheistic discourse: a radical denial of all God-talk. See “Niveau de signification et athéisme de l’écriture,” p. 86. This is a contemporary affirmation of the negative theology espoused by medieval thinkers such as Maimonides, for whom both language and image were idolatrous insofar as both turned God into a representable form. See recent discussion in Halberstam and Margalit, *Idolatry*, pp. 37–66.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to deny the evidence the Bible itself supplies (confirmed by archaeological discoveries) regarding the ritualistic use of icons in ancient Israel, whether within the spatial confines of the Jerusalem Temple or in altars outside it. These iconic images reflect the syncretism of Israelite Yahwism and Canaanite religion. There is no evidence, however, that these syncretistic practices led to the iconic representation of the God of Israel, YHWH, as part of any official cultic worship. See Fishbane, *The Garments of Yerah*, pp. 49–63, esp. 55–58.

<sup>19</sup> “Anthropomorphism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), 1:318.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>21</sup> See Exod. 24:10; 1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9. See Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament,” pp. 32–33; Cherbonnier, “The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism.” Eichrodt, in *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:16–22, argues that, according to the ancient Israelite view, divine manifestation primarily takes the form of either nature or

The anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine in ancient Israelite culture is connected with another major theme in the Hebrew Bible: the concern with the presence of God and his nearness.<sup>22</sup> This concern was expressed cultically in terms of the Temple in Jerusalem that served as the set residence of the God of Israel. Indeed, it seems that the two cherubim, carved of wood and plated with gold, that stood in the *devir* (the Holy of Holies) of Solomon's Temple served as the *cathedra*, the special throne for the invisible God,<sup>23</sup> as the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord (*'aron berit YHWH*), described especially in Deuteronomic and Priestly writers, itself represented the palace-shrine of YHWH. Hence we find the technical expression *yoshev ha-keruvim* (see 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Isa. 37:16; Ps. 80:1, 99:1), clearly signifying that the deity is enthroned upon the cherubim in the Temple. That the cherubim symbolize the throne is also attested by the explicit reference to them as the chariot (see 1 Chron. 28:18; Sirach 49:8). Analogously, according to the Priestly account of the Tabernacle in the desert, there were two cherubim on the ark-cover (*kapporet*). From a comparison of the two narratives scholars have concluded that these cherubim also symbolize the throne of God.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it is assumed by scholars that the cherubim-throne is an "empty seat," for the deity is present but not visualized. The conception implied here, of an invisibly present God, is "at once both aniconic and anthropomorphic."<sup>25</sup> As Menahem Haran has concluded, we have here a set of symbols—throne, footstool, House of God, all rooted in pre-biblical mythological culture—combined with a concept of God that is decidedly non-mythological.<sup>26</sup> The fact of the matter, however, is that there is sufficient textual evidence from the biblical canon to demonstrate that the enthroned Presence of God in the Temple often took the form of visual images and was not restricted to the auditory realm.<sup>27</sup> Thus it was

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humanity. A similar claim can be made with respect to theophanies of the ancient Greek gods; see Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 106: "There was no end to the gods' human disguises, as old men and women, heralds and, frequently, young and beautiful people. . . . Essentially anthropomorphic, the gods stalked the world as mortals, disguising themselves so well that people could never be totally sure that a stranger was all that he seemed." On the phenomenon of seeing God in Hebrew Scripture, see Baudissin's comprehensive study "'Gott schauen' in der alttestamentlichen Religion." See also Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, pp. 63–105, 227–277.

<sup>22</sup> The bibliography on this theme is quite extensive; I will cite only a few exemplary studies: see Haran, "The Divine Presence in the Israelite Cult and the Cultic Institutions"; Lindblom, "Theophanies in Holy Places in Hebrew Religion"; Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, pp. 191–209.

<sup>23</sup> See Haran, "The Ark and the Cherubim"; idem, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, pp. 247–259.

<sup>24</sup> See Haran, "Ark and the Cherubim," pp. 33ff.; Tarragen, "La Kapporet est-elle une fiction ou un élément du culte tardif?" and references on pp. 10–11 n. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, p. 37. See also Haran's formulation in *Temples and Temple-Service*, p. 246.

<sup>26</sup> "Ark and the Cherubim," p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> See Isa. 6:1; Amos 9:1; Ps. 11:4–7, 27:4, 42:3, 63:3, 84:8; Exod. 23:17, 34:23–24; Deut. 16:16, 31:11. In the case of Ps. 42:3 it is likely that there is a change from the original *qal* form *'ereh*, "I will behold," to the masoretic vocalization in the niphal *'era'eh*, "I will be seen." See

especially in the Temple, the *hagios topos*, that one beheld God's countenance.<sup>28</sup>

We come, then, to the fundamental paradox: there was no fixed iconic representation of the deity upon the throne, but it was precisely this institution that provided the context for visualization of the divine Presence.<sup>29</sup> This basic insight was understood by the phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw, who wrote, "The ark of Jahveh, for instance, was an empty throne of God. . . . This of course does not involve any 'purely spiritual' worship of God, but merely that the deity should assume his place on the empty throne at his epiphany."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the cultic image of the enthroned God in the earthly Temple yielded the genre of a "throne vision" or "throne theophany" (i.e., the visionary experience of God in human form seated on the heavenly throne in the celestial Palace),<sup>31</sup> which became especially important in the Jewish apocalyptic<sup>32</sup> and

Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, s.v. Ps. 42:3. It is likely, moreover, that a similar change occurred at the hand of editors in Ps. 84:8, where the first word in the masoretic reading *yera'eh 'el 'elohim be-siyyon*, "appearing before God in Zion," probably was originally *yir'eh*, "seeing." See M. Buitendijk, *The Psalms* (New York, 1969), pp. 774–776. Other verses in which a change from the active to the passive, in an effort to attenuate the possibility of seeing God, is suspected are Exod. 23:15, 17, 34:20; Deut. 31:11; 1 Sam. 1:22; Isa. 1:12. See Baudissin, "Gott schauen," pp. 181–185. See also R. Sollamo, in *Renderings of the Hebrew Semiprepositions in the Septuagint* (Helsinki, 1979), p. 118, where he suggests that the Greek translators "understood the phrase 'to see God's face' as a metaphor meaning 'to appear before God.'"

<sup>28</sup> See Baudissin, "Gott schauen," pp. 175–178, 202–207; G. R. Berry, "The Glory of Yahweh and the Temple," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937): 115–117; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, pp. 161–226, 278–349; Levenson, "The Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience"; Uffenheimer, "The Religious Experience of the Psalmists and the Prophetic Mind"; Smith, "Seeing God" in the Psalms." See, however, Gruenwald, "Priests, Prophets, Apocalyptic Visionaries, and Mystics," in his *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, pp. 135–136, where he expresses the view that most of the prophets "rarely prophesied in the temple or saw visions there," a fact related to a "self-imposed separation of Prophecy from the temple." See idem, "The Impact of Priestly Traditions on the Creation of Merkabah Mysticism and the Shiur Komah," pp. 72–74. On the other hand, Gruenwald acknowledges that, especially in the Second Temple period—when prophecy no longer had an authoritative status—there evolved a cluster of traditions that attributed revelatory experiences (visual and auditory) to priests in the Temple; see *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism*, pp. 96–97; "Impact of Priestly Traditions," pp. 79–87. See Gnuse, "The Temple Experience of Jaddus in the *Antiquities* of Josephus."

<sup>29</sup> See Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible*, pp. 47–48. On visionary experience in biblical prophecy, see Sister, "Die Typen der prophetischen Visionen in der Bibel."

<sup>30</sup> *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 449.

<sup>31</sup> The key passages in the Hebrew Bible are 1 Kings 22:19, Ezek. 1:26, and Dan. 7:9–13.

<sup>32</sup> See Hamerton-Kelly, "The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic." For a discussion of the development of the throne-vision in these passages and in the subsequent Enoch tradition, see Black, "The Throne-Theophany Prophetic Commission and the 'Son of Man.'" A critical text in this regard is Testament of Levi 5:1ff., which reports a vision of God sitting on the throne in the heavenly temple. Subsequent rabbinic interpretations of the vision in Isa. 6:1 reflect the tendency to shift the locus of the vision from the terrestrial to the celestial Temple; see Uffenheimer, "The Consecration of Isaiah in Rabbinic Exegesis," pp. 238ff. See also Himmelfarb, "From Prophecy to Apocalypse," pp. 150–151, and idem, *Ascent to Heaven in Early Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 25–46. For the view that the distancing of God from the earthly to the heavenly Temple in apocalyptic writings represents the social opposition to the Jerusalemite Temple and the priesthood, see Gruenwald, "Priests, Prophets, Apocalyptic Visionaries, and Mystics," pp. 129–130, 137–139.

mystical traditions<sup>33</sup> and whose influence is clearly discernible in both Christianity<sup>34</sup> and Islam.<sup>35</sup>

The visionary genre is well rooted in the earlier conception of God enthroned upon the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. This conception continued to have a decisive influence on later rabbinic authorities, as may be shown, for example, in the talmudic legend, assumed to be related to the Jewish mystical tradition,<sup>36</sup> concerning R. Ishmael ben Elisha having a vision of Akatriel sitting on the throne in the innermost sanctum of the Temple.<sup>37</sup> The Holy of Holies, in which the Ark of the Covenant was enshrined, was the seat of the divine Presence, and hence the locus for the visualization of God. Echoes of this Jewish tradition can be heard in the New Testament as well. In Acts 22:17–18 Paul reports his ecstatic vision of Jesus in the Temple: "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the Temple, I fell into a deep trance and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'"<sup>38</sup> In this context it is of interest to recall, as well, the record of the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, who had a vision of Gabriel, identified as the angel of the Lord (Luke 1:8–11), who "stands in the presence

<sup>33</sup> See Neher, "Le Voyage mystique des quatre"; Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis*, p. 106; Chernus, "The Pilgrimage to the Merkavah: An Interpretation of Early Jewish Mysticism." A similar approach has been taken with respect to the 4Q Shiroth 'Olat ha-Shabbat, presumably composed by the covenantal community at Qumran: the Temple liturgy projected into the heavenly realm may have occasioned an ecstatic transport of members of the community to the celestial Temple, wherein they may have participated with the angelic priests. See Maier, pp. 133–135; Newson, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, pp. 59–72; idem, "'He Has Established for Himself Priests,'" pp. 114–115.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Matt. 22:44 (cf. Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42–43) and 26:64 (cf. Mark 14:62, Luke 22:69), based on Ps. 110:1. See also Rev. 3:21, 4:2, 5:1 and passim. Cf. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, pp. 52–103; Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>35</sup> Qur'an 2:255, 7:54, 10:3. See Corbin, "Et son trône était porté sur l'eau," pp. 293ff.; Gädje, *Qur'an and Its Exegesis*, pp. 146–149.

<sup>36</sup> See Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, pp. 51–54.

<sup>37</sup> B. (Babylonian Talmud) Berakhot 7a. See Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 96; idem, "Impact of Priestly Traditions," pp. 82–83; Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien des jüdischen Engelglaubens in vorrabbinischer Zeit*, pp. 205–208. Interesting in this regard is another legend, preserved in P. (Palestinian Talmud) Yoma 8:3, 42c (cf. B. Yoma 39b) concerning the high priest Simeon the Just: on every Yom Kippur, when Simeon entered the Holy of Holies, he was accompanied by an old man clad and wrapped in white. R. Abahu reportedly said that this old man was not a human being but God himself. Although this is not an enthronement vision per se, it is nevertheless significant that the vision of God in human form reportedly occurs within the spatial confines of the Temple. That the Temple was viewed by certain rabbis as the locus for other sorts of visions, including prognostications, is evident from the classical sources as well. See *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 20:4, pp. 454–455; B. Yoma 21b; Baba Batra 147a. The Temple was also viewed as a locus for auditory revelations, as is shown by legends regarding Johanan Hyrcanus the high priest and Simeon the Righteous; cf. T. (Tosefta) Sotah 13:5–6; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.282–283. See also Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 96; idem, "Impact of Priestly Traditions," pp. 81–82.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Betz, "Die Vision des Paulus im Tempel von Jerusalem," pp. 113ff. See also Heb. 6:19–20, where Jesus is described as the "high priest after the order of Melchizedek" who has entered the inner shrine behind the veil; and cf. the extended discussion of related motifs in Renwick, *Paul, the Temple, and the Presence of God*.

of God" (1:19) in the Temple.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly enough, according to a passage in one of the major compositions in the corpus of early Jewish mysticism, *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the third entrance of the Temple (see Jer. 38:14) is set as the scene for the disclosure of the techniques for visionary ascent transmitted by the master, R. Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah, to the other members of the mystical fellowship, an incident that is obviously supposed to have taken place before the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 C.E.<sup>40</sup> Within the context of this literature, in line with earlier apocalyptic sources, the locus of the vision is the heavenly realm and not the terrestrial Temple. Even so, it is significant that the latter is selected as the place in which the master divulges the secrets of the mystical technique required in order to ascend to heaven to have a vision of the enthroned divine Presence.<sup>41</sup> Following the same trajectory, in a later text, the classic of medieval Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, we find descriptions of ecstatic experience connected especially with the high priest's entry into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.<sup>42</sup> As a result of the service he has performed below, he is translated to the spiritual realm of the *sefirot*, the divine emanations. While obviously different from the earlier visionary texts, there is nevertheless continuity, since the ecstatic experience is set specifically within the confines of the Temple as a result of cultic worship.

A critical factor in determining the biblical (and, by extension, subsequent Jewish) attitude toward visualization of God concerns the question of the morphological resemblance between the human body and the divine. Indeed, it

<sup>39</sup> See Gruenwald ("Impact of Priestly Traditions," p. 82), who cites this source and rightly notes that it reflects the influence of Zech. 3:1ff.

<sup>40</sup> Schäfer et al., eds., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, §§ 202–203. See Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," p. 169.

<sup>41</sup> See Gruenwald, "Priests, Prophets, Apocalyptic Visionaries, and Mystics," p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> See sources cited by Scholem in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 378 n. 9. It should be noted that in the case of the *Zohar* the high priest's entry into the Holy of Holies may also have erotic undertones, for the Holy of Holies symbolizes the feminine aspect of the divine and entry thereto is a form of sexual union (see esp. *Zohar* 3:296b; the symbolic connection between the inner sanctum of the Temple and the womb of God's wife is already implied in Ezek. 16 and 23; see Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, pp. 89–125, esp. 104). The mystical experience of the high priest, therefore, also involves the theurgical and soteriological function of *tiqqun*, i.e., uniting the male and female elements of divinity (see *Zohar* 3:66b). See Liebes, "The Messiah of the *Zohar*," pp. 194–195 (English trans., *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 65–66). See also pp. 230–232 (this material was not translated in the English version), where Liebes notes an interesting parallel between the zoharic motif and a passage in the Valentinian Gnostic work *The Gospel of Philip* (69.25–30) that identifies the Holy of Holies as the bridal chamber wherein the sexes are cultically united, a process that is referred to as redemption. (See Idel, "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah," pp. 203–204.) See also "Messiah," p. 195 n. 364 (English trans., *Studies*, p. 188 n. 185), where Liebes remarks that there is no evidence that either R. Simeon bar Yoḥai or R. Moses de León was a priest. However, I have found one possible piece of such evidence. In MS New York–JTSA Mic. 1609, fol. 129b it is stated: "This is the commentary on the thirteen attributes by way of truth from the sage, R. Moses de León, the Priest." There is no doubt that this text is in fact a work of de León, but there is no way of verifying if this scribal attestation is historically accurate. It is nonetheless interesting in light of the special role accorded the high priest in the *Zohar* as a prototype of the visionary ecstatic.



seems that the problem of God's visibility is invariably linked to the question of God's corporeality, which, in turn, is bound up with the matter of human likeness to God.<sup>43</sup> The strictures against idol-making only attest to the basic propensity of the human spirit to figure the divine in human form.<sup>44</sup> Although the official cult of ancient Israelite religion prohibited the making of images or icons of God, this basic need to figure or image God in human form found expression in other ways, including the prophetic visions of God as an anthropos, as well as the basic tenet of the similitude of man and divinity.<sup>45</sup>

The biblical conception is such that the anthropos is as much cast in the image of God as God is cast in the image of the anthropos. This is stated in the very account of the creation of the human being in the first chapter of Genesis (attributed to P) in the claim that Adam was created in the image of God. It has been long debated by scholars how this pivotal notion should be interpreted: does the divine image involve concrete, physical resemblance, or is it rather an abstract likeness based on spirit, soul, reason, or some behavioral mode? According to some biblical scholars, in this context the words *şelem* (image) and *demut* (likeness) imply physical resemblance, as may be proven on the basis of ancient Near Eastern cognates,<sup>46</sup> whereas for others these terms suggest a behavioral or abstract spiritual resemblance<sup>47</sup> or simply the notion of an object consecrated by the divine spirit.<sup>48</sup> It can be shown from a number of passages—the majority, it would seem, of a postexilic provenance, but clearly reflecting older mythological notions—that the biblical conception is such that the human likeness to God is based on man's external form.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup> The point is particularly relevant in the context of orthodox Christianity, where the incarnation of the Father in the flesh of the Son would seem to allow readily for the making of images of God. Nevertheless, or perhaps on account of this, the early Church showed hostility toward the making of images. See Clerc, *Les théories relatives au culte des images chez les auteurs grecs du II<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.*, pp. 125–168; Bevan, *Holy Images*, pp. 84–112; Baynes, "Idolatry and the Early Church," pp. 116–143; Grabar, *Christian Iconography*. For other references, see Grigg, "Constantine the Great and the Cult without Images," pp. 3 n. 7, 24–32. See also Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, pp. 41–98; Barasch, *Icon*, pp. 95–182.

<sup>45</sup> See Moore, "Prophetic Iconoclasm," p. 209.

<sup>46</sup> See Weinfeld, "God the Creator in Gen. I and in the Prophecy of Second Isaiah," pp. 113–116; von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>47</sup> See N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1970), pp. 15–16; C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. 147–150; Miller, "In the 'Image' and 'Likeness' of God"; Sawyer, "The Meaning of 'In the Image of God' in Genesis I–XI."

<sup>48</sup> See van Buren, "The Salmē in Mesopotamia in Art and Religion."

<sup>49</sup> See Barr ("Theophany and Anthropomorphism," pp. 31–38), who originally suggested that the biblical conception of the image of God presupposed a resemblance between human and divine forms. See, however, his subsequent retraction in "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis." That the words *şelem* and *demut* have the connotation of physical resemblance or form throughout the Bible can be shown from a careful examination of most of the relevant sources. Of the seventeen times the word *şelem* occurs, five are related to the problem at hand; in ten other instances the meaning is concrete or physical resemblance; in the two remaining cases (Ps. 39:7 and 73:20) the connotation seems to be dream or shadow. That *demut* likewise connotes physical likeness can be shown from its usage in the relevant biblical passages, excluding for the moment those passages

This is most evident, for example, in Ezek. 1:26, which can be viewed as the "midrashic" underpinning of Gen. 1:26,<sup>50</sup> that is, the fact that the glory of God appears in the form of the image of a human being grounds the assertion that the human being is made in the image of God. According to Ezekiel, the glory is the human form of God's manifestation and not a hypostasis distinct from God.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, in other biblical contexts the *kavod* does not necessarily imply the human form of God. The particular usage of *kevod YHWH* (Presence of the Lord) is a characteristic feature of the Priestly stratum, where it serves as a *terminus technicus* to describe God's indwelling and nearness to Israel, which is manifest as a fiery brightness, splendor, and radiance that, due to the human incapacity to bear the sight of it, is usually enveloped in a thick cloud.<sup>52</sup> (In the case of Ezekiel, as well, the conception of the glory as a luminous body is apparent from the description of the enthroned figure as being surrounded with splendor from the waist up and with fire from the waist down, a motif found elsewhere in the Bible, with parallels in Sumerian and Babylonian materials.<sup>53</sup>) That this luminous *kavod*, however, had the capacity to be visualized as an anthropos is illustrated from the case of Ezekiel. The *kavod* idea developed by the latter, although apparently based in great measure on Mesopotamian and Syrian iconography,<sup>54</sup> is without doubt related to older assumptions of biblical *homo religiosus* concerning the anthropomorphic form of God.<sup>55</sup>

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that speak of the divine likeness. See Gen. 5:3; 2 Kings 16:10; Isa. 40:18; Ezek. 1:5, 10, 13, 16, 22, 26, 28; 10:1, 21, 22, and 23:15; 2 Chron. 4:3; Dan. 10:16. Two exceptions are Isa. 13:4 and Ps. 58:5, where *demut* is used in the sense of metaphorical resemblance. Cf. N. Porteous, "Image of God," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1962), 2:683, where he makes a distinction between *selem* and *demut*, arguing that the former is concrete and the latter more abstract. See also Miller, "In the 'Image,'" p. 291. Other scholars maintain that the word *selem* was employed in order to avoid the suggestion of the resemblance of the human body and God's form. Cf. Barr, "Image of God," pp. 20–24; Miller, pp. 301–302. See also Sawyer, "Meaning," p. 420. I see no philological basis for such distinctions.

<sup>50</sup> Some scholars maintain that Ezekiel was influenced by the Priestly account in Genesis, whereas other scholars, who follow in the Wellhausen tradition, argue that Ezekiel's vision made possible the doctrine of the image of God in P. See Weinfeld, "God the Creator," p. 113 n. 50. On the relationship of P and Ezekiel, see the recent remarks of B. A. Levine in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia, 1989), p. xxix.

<sup>51</sup> See Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, pp. 177–178. See, however, the remark of Segal in *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*, p. 14, to the effect that Ezekiel distinguished the "essential personhood of God" from the glory in which he manifested himself as a human form. See also Everson, "Ezekiel and the Glory of the Lord Tradition."

<sup>52</sup> Exod. 16:10, 24:16–17, 40:34–35; Lev. 9:23–24; Num. 14:10, 16:19. See Aalen, *Die Begriffe 'Licht' und 'Finsternis' im Alten Testament*, pp. 73–86.

<sup>53</sup> See A. L. Oppenheim, "Akkadian pul(u)h(t)u and melammū," *Journal of the American Oriental Studies* 63 (1943): 31–34; Cassin, *La splendeur divine*, pp. 65–82; Weinfeld, "God the Creator," 131–132; N. M. Waldman, "A Note on Ezek. 1:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 614–618.

<sup>54</sup> See L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World*, pp. 48–63; Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst*; Greenberg, "Ezekiel's Vision," pp. 163ff. See also A. Parrot, *Babylon and the Old Testament*, trans. S. H. Hooke (New York, 1958), pp. 128–136; Landersdorfer, *Baal Tetramorphos und die Kerube des Ezechiel*.

<sup>55</sup> See Weinfeld, "God the Creator," pp. 116–120; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (New York,

Sufficient textual evidence exists to demonstrate that some later rabbinic interpreters, partially under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, understood the notion of the divine image in a decidedly nonanthropomorphic way,<sup>56</sup> whereas for other authorities it implied the corporealization of divinity in human form.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, the anthropomorphic reading of Gen. 1:26 endured as a standard polemical stance in Christian writing from the first centuries into the Middle Ages,<sup>58</sup> as well as in Islamic and Karaite antirabbinic polemics.<sup>59</sup> The morphological resemblance between the divine and human image, rooted in biblical thinking, played a central role in the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism in all of its stages. As will become evident in the course of this study, the problem of visionary experience in Jewish mysticism cannot be treated in isolation from the question of God's form or image. The problem surrounding the claim for visionary experience invariably touches upon the larger philosophical-theological problem of God's having a visible form or body.

To be sure, the issues of visionary experience and anthropomorphism are theoretically distinct. That is, from an analytical standpoint it is possible to conceive of a divine body that is nevertheless invisible to human beings. Conversely, God may be visible, but not in human form. It is nevertheless the case that the two are often intertwined in classical theological and philosophical texts in general and in the primary sources of biblical and postbiblical Judaism in particular. The inextricable link between anthropomorphism and visionary experience from the vantage point of Judaism is brought out in a striking way in a passage in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, where he reports of

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1983), p. 51 n. 28. See, however, G. von Rad's comment in "δοξα," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1983), 2:241 (hereafter TDNT): "The other distinctive feature is that Ezekiel portrays the כבוד יהוה in human form, with the strongest possible emphasis on the nature of God as light." See idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:240 n. 119. While it is fair enough to contrast Ezekiel's depiction of the glory with that of the Priestly authorship, it seems to me that the anthropomorphic understanding of the glory is not completely innovated by Ezekiel. Indeed, the narrative in Exod. 33:18ff. already suggests such a conception. Cf. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis*, pp. 119–120.

<sup>56</sup> Jervell, *Imago Dei*, pp. 71–121; Altmann, "Homo Imago Dei in Jewish and Christian Theology"; Barr, "Image of God," p. 13; Grözinger, "Der Mensch als Ebenbild Gottes," pp. 64–65.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Idea of God*, pp. 50–52; Smith, "The Image of God." It would be of interest to compare this line of thinking in rabbinic sources to the statement in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 11.4, 1: "You are the image of the invisible God. . . . For the image of God is man. He who wishes to be pious towards God does good to man, because the body of man bears the image of God" (regarding this text, see n. 61, below). On the centrality of an anthropological reading of Gen. 1:26 and 2:7 in Gnostic mythology, see Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, pp. 87–100.

<sup>58</sup> See Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God," pp. 271–272. On the other hand, there is ample evidence in Christian authors to demonstrate that a corporeal understanding of Gen. 1:26, perhaps mediated by Ezek. 1:26, influenced attitudes about Christ as the visible image of the invisible Father.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Nemoy, "Al-Qirqisani's Account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity," pp. 331, 350–351; Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, 2:38–39, 83–86; Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, p. 183; Lieberman, *Shkiin*, pp. 11–14; Sharf, *The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo*, pp. 73–93; Orfali, "Anthropomorphism in the Christian Reproach of the Jews in Spain."

the Jews that they imagine that “the Father of all, the unbegotten God, has hands and feet, and fingers, and a soul, like a composite being; and they for this reason teach that it was the Father Himself who appeared to Abraham and to Jacob.”<sup>60</sup>

A second, and perhaps more poignant, example of this linkage can be found in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 17, whose terminological and conceptual relationship to ancient Jewish mysticism has been noted by various scholars.<sup>61</sup> In this text, as well, one finds that the attribution of bodily form to God is linked directly to the issue of visionary experience: “He has the most beautiful Form for the sake of man, in order that the pure in heart shall be able to see Him, that they shall rejoice on account of whatever they have endured.”<sup>62</sup> As Shlomo Pines has noted,<sup>63</sup> the last sentence is probably a commentary on the verse in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:8): “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

In the case of the Jewish-Christian document, the content of the vision is specified further in terms of God’s form, which, as we learn from the continuation of the text, is a shape that is limited or located in space. From the vantage point of this doctrine of Jewish Christianity, closely alligned with what we find in Jewish esotericism of Late Antiquity, God has a visible form, and, consequently, the image of God in humanity is to be found in the body.<sup>64</sup> There can be little question, moreover, that historically the theological discussion concerning anthropomorphism in both medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy starts from the problem of the vision of God implied by the prophetic tradition: if God could be seen he would fall under the category of visible objects, yet only that which possesses a body is visible. Hence, to assert that God is visible is effectively to posit that God can assume corporeal form.

#### DENIAL OF GOD’S VISIBILITY

A significant element in the biblical tradition, as we have seen in the case of the Deuteronomist, opposes physical anthropomorphism, emphasizing the verbal/auditory over the iconic/visual. Positing that God addresses human beings through speech does not affect the claim to divine transcendence, that is, the utter incomparability of God to anything created, humanity included. The most extreme formulation of such a demythologizing trend occurs in Deutero-Isaiah: “To whom, then, can you liken God, what form [*demut*] compare to Him?” (Isa. 40:18; cf. 40:25, 46:5). In this verse one can perceive, as has been

<sup>60</sup> In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, 1981), 1:256.

<sup>61</sup> Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judentum*, pp. 110–115; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 41; idem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 172–173; Pines, “Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the Sefer Yezira and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies.”

<sup>62</sup> Pines, “Points of Similarity,” p. 64.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Quispel, “The Discussion of Judaic Christianity,” pp. 148, 153–154.

pointed out by Moshe Weinfeld,<sup>65</sup> a direct polemic against the Priestly tradition that man is created in God's image. This tradition implies two things: first, that God has an image (*demut*), and, second, that in virtue of that image in which Adam was created there is a basic similarity or likeness between human and divine. The verse in Deutero-Isaiah attacks both of these presumptions: since no image can be attributed to God it cannot be said that the human being is created in God's image. From this vantage point there is an unbridgeable and irreducible gap separating Creator and creature.

It has long been recognized by scholars that a fundamental tension emerges from the various literary units of the Bible with respect to the question of anthropomorphism and the description of God. Addressing this issue, Walther Eichrodt was led to conclude that a gradual "spiritualization of theophany" is discernible in Old Testament theology.<sup>66</sup> Eichrodt's position, fairly commonplace in biblical studies, assumes a chronological evolution, with the more advanced stages of spirituality marked by a concomitant rejection of iconicity and anthropomorphic representation.

The form-critical method allows us to resolve some of the more glaring textual discrepancies, at least on one level. Thus, to take an example from the Sinai pericopae, the older theophanic tradition in Exod. 19:11 that God descended on Mount Sinai before the sight of the people, implying thereby that the divine possesses or assumes a visible form, or the even more striking account in Exod. 24:10–11 in which Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders saw a corporeal manifestation of God on the mountain, stand in marked contrast to Deut. 4:11, which flatly denies that anyone saw an image of God at Sinai. Appeal to the literary-critical approach can resolve these contradictory accounts of the Sinaitic theophany.

Although the chapter in Deuteronomy appears itself to be an exegetical elaboration of Exod. 19, which, in contrast to Exod. 24, highlights the auditory as opposed to the visual element of the prophetic revelation,<sup>67</sup> a careful reading of the two contexts shows that the Deuteronomist completely eliminated any reference or possible inference concerning God's visible form. That is, the author of Exod. 19 takes for granted that God has a visible form but that vision of that form may be harmful or injurious to the seer.<sup>68</sup> Hence, God commanded Moses to establish the proper barriers around the mountain (Exod. 19:12) so that no one would perish by gazing upon the Lord (19:21). On the basis of this account the Deuteronomist repeatedly affirms that at Sinai the divine voice

<sup>65</sup> Weinfeld, "God the Creator," pp. 124–125; see also Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, pp. 325–326.

<sup>66</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:23ff. Cf. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:190, 239ff.

<sup>67</sup> See Uffenheimer, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, p. 107; Nicholson, "The Interpretation of Exodus XXIV 9–11," p. 95; idem, "The Antiquity of the Tradition in Exodus XXIV 9–11," pp. 75–76.

<sup>68</sup> The potential harm resulting from the manifestation of a god is a common motif in pagan sources as well; see Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 109.

spoke out of the fire (4:12, 15, 36; 5:4) but no shape was visible. This author, however, stresses not the potential harm of the visible image but rather the inherent impossibility of God being circumscribed in any image or form. In these instances, then, a certain chronological evolution can be charted by comparative analysis of the different texts and their contexts.

The paradox nevertheless consists of the fact that sometimes within the same source contradictory views can be discerned. Thus, for example, underlying the statement of Exod. 24:10, as we have seen, is the claim that God can manifest himself in a visible form. On the other hand, Exod. 33:20 seems to limit severely the possibility of visionary experience by stating categorically that no mortal creature, even of the stature of Moses, can see the divine face. To be sure, in that context Moses was granted a vision of the divine back (v. 23); thus, in this case, there is no absolute rejection of the claim that God has a visible form, as we find, for instance, in Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah. Nevertheless, Exod. 33:20 and 23 do state that Moses could not have a vision of the divine form in its frontal aspect, implying, therefore, that he, like other mortal humans, could not see the likeness of God in its fullest manifestation.

If we assume that both Exod. 24:10 and 33:20 derive from the same literary source, as is generally claimed, appeal to the form-critical method to resolve textual discrepancies in this instance will be of no avail. This example demonstrates that the developmental hypothesis, based on a progression from pagan-mythological to monotheistic belief, does not sufficiently account for the paradoxical character within Israelite culture (as it is to be reconstructed from its literary remains) on this fundamental issue. We are dealing not with a strictly chronological sequence, but rather with one that is typological in nature. The complexity arises precisely because not every instance of textual contradiction can be resolved by appeal to the historicity of literary sources. That is to say, therefore, that the “naive” conception of the anthropomorphic manifestation of God and the more “spiritualized” conceptions must lie side by side if one is to take account faithfully of the biblical perspective. It is of interest to note in this connection that the rabbis of the second century were bothered by the apparent contradiction between Exod. 33:20 and Isa. 6:1—how could Isaiah say, “I saw my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne” when Moses himself had already said that no mortal creature could see God’s face? According to the answer given in the Talmud, all the prophets, excluding Moses, perceived some form of the divine, for they saw through the speculum that does not shine; Moses, by contrast, saw no form, for he saw through a speculum that shines.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> B. Yevamot 49b. The rabbinic distinction should be compared to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror through a riddle, but then face to face.” For Paul, the vision of God in this corporeal existence is an impossibility—we see now only as if through a mirror and then only dimly—but in the world-to-come it will be possible. The view of Paul is similar to that of R. Dosa’s interpretation of Exod. 33:20 cited at n. 134. To anticipate the discussion below, the impossibility of seeing God is tied to one’s bodily existence; hence, after the death of the body such a vision is possible. In medieval Christendom the generally accepted view was likewise that the *visio beatifica* was possible for the blessed in Paradise. Similarly, the majority of

The rabbis are sensitive to the fact that the apparently contradictory claims in the biblical canon with respect to the issue of seeing God must be resolved typologically and not chronologically. Not every textual contradiction can be resolved by appeal to the source theory that has dominated contemporary hermeneutics of the Bible. On the contrary, we must be aware of the fact that any given culture fosters divergent views that are not always logically consistent. Indeed, different impulses can be operative within a culture at the same time without necessitating a resolution that adopts one alternative to the exclusion of the others. Hegemony may be the desire of priests or autocrats, but it is rarely the measure or mark of cultural creativity.

Moreover, a diachronic approach like that adopted by Eichrodt is a problem because in relatively late sources we find an elaborate use of anthropomorphic language in visionary contexts, precisely where one would expect to find an extreme rejection of anthropomorphism. A striking example of this can be gathered from a comparison of Exod. 33:20 and Num. 12:8. We have already noted that the former case affirms the inherent inability of Moses to see the face of God. In Num. 12:8 it is stated, by contrast, and without qualification, that Moses beheld "the likeness of the Lord" (*temunat YHWH*).<sup>70</sup>

In this set of contradictory verses the chronologically earlier source, Exod. 33:20, attributed to J, limits the extent of the vision, while the later source, Num. 12:8, deriving from P, does not. Significantly, the Priestly source ascribes a visible form or likeness to God (which is in keeping with what we discussed above in connection with the notion of the divine image and likeness in Gen. 1:26). Alternatively, one could argue that in the case of Exod. 33:20 the issue is not having such an experience, but surviving it.<sup>71</sup> That is, even according to that context, one may theoretically see God, though one could not live to tell about it. The seeing of God's face is objectionable not because it is theologically impossible but rather because of the ensuing danger that it necessarily entails.<sup>72</sup> The biblical God is not invisible *de jure*, but rather, as E. L. Cherbonnier put it, "as a matter of tactics. *De facto*, men seldom do see him. Upon occasion, however he does show himself."<sup>73</sup>

Even if we grant the veracity of this interpretation, the fact of the matter

Mutakallimun maintained that a vision of Allah was possible only in the next world. See Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, pp. 64–68; Altmann, *Studies*, p. 144. Finally, mention should be made of John 6:46, "No one has seen the Father except he who is from God [i.e., the Son]; he has seen the Father" (cf. 1:18). This seems to be a new interpretation of Exod. 33:20, which claimed that even Moses could not see God. The stature of Jesus is thus raised above the greatest of Old Testament prophets, Moses. See Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, p. 213; *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, introduction, translation, and notes by R. E. Brown (The Anchor Bible, vol. 29; Garden City, N.Y., 1966), p. 36.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta, 1978), p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> This is a point often overlooked by interpreters ancient and modern, who understand the verse as asserting that theoretically no mortal can see God. The danger implicit in encountering God is also emphasized in Deut. 4:21–23. See also Judges 13:22.

<sup>72</sup> See Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Idea of God*, p. 95.

<sup>73</sup> "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," p. 199.

remains that the later source expresses the position that seems more appropriate for the earlier one. The point is made even more poignantly by the case of the apocalyptic vision recorded in the seventh chapter of Daniel. (According to critical scholars, this belongs to the part of that book composed during the reign of Antiochus IV in the second century B.C.E., between 168 and 165.) The vision of the divine in anthropomorphic form is not a regression to some primitive modality long since overtaken by a more spiritual faith. This vision, as that which was developed in other apocalyptic writings, reestablishes an older Israelite tradition regarding the visible form of God as an anthropos.

The apparently contradictory beliefs about God's visibility (and hence corporeality) in the Bible should be viewed typologically and not chronologically. Indeed, even with respect to those examples of textual discrepancies to which the source method applies, if one adopts a more organic approach, viewing the Bible hermeneutically from the perspective of the canon in its completed form, the problem is raised to a secondary level: Given the final redaction of the sources, how can the two be reconciled? How can both assertions be simultaneously maintained? How can the two statements inhabit the same corpus? Yet it is precisely because both points of view, so strikingly different, inhabit the same corpus that the history of Jewish attitudes toward the visual imaging of God unfolded in the dialectical way it did.

#### VISION OF GOD IN JEWISH APOCALYPTIC

While it clearly lies beyond the scope of this chapter to present an exhaustive treatment of the problem of visionary experience in apocalyptic literature, it would be inexcusable to ignore the issue entirely, especially in light of the widely accepted view that the early Jewish mystical texts, known as the *Hekhalot*, preserve elements of the older Jewish apocalypses.<sup>74</sup> The apocalyptic writings—in reality an eclectic group of texts that share some basic literary and theological traits but are not reducible in any essentialist way—are characterized by a number of distinctive features. One feature is that the recorded visions of the enthroned form of God's presence (or glory) and/or the angelic hosts in the heavenly realm result from otherworldly journeys that, one may presume, were induced by specific visionary practices, though the records of these visions were often expressed in conventional imagery drawn from the theophanic traditions in Hebrew Scripture.<sup>75</sup> The apocalyptic orientation is manifest in some Jewish and Christian texts from Late Antiquity, written dur-

<sup>74</sup> This, of course, is the basic assumption of Scholem; see *Major Trends*, p. 43, and the fuller working out of this hypothesis in Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. See also Maier, "Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der jüdischen Apokalyptik und Gnosis"; and the more recent discussions by Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, pp. 63–114; Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature"; Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition."

<sup>75</sup> See Merkur, "The Visionary Practices of Jewish Apocalyptists."



ing the period of roughly 250 B.C.E. to 250 C.E. The attempts to define the genre of apocalyptic are manifold and universal consensus is still lacking.<sup>76</sup> I am not here concerned with providing a precise taxonomy of apocalyptic writings, but wish only to cast a glance in the direction of one central issue: the visual encounter with the divine.<sup>77</sup> It is evident that such visions, in the framework of apocalypticism, are part of the much larger phenomenon regarding the disclosure of divine secrets.<sup>78</sup> That is, apocalyptic is the revelation of divine mysteries through the agency of visions, dreams, and other paranormal states of consciousness. Needless to say, the context of these visions varies considerably in the range of texts grouped together under the genus apocalyptic. Again, my focus is necessarily limited, as I am concerned exclusively with visions of God.

The narrowness of my concern is doubly clear when it is realized that I am interested only in Jewish apocalyptic, leaving aside, therefore, the genre of Christian apocalyptic.<sup>79</sup> A sense of uneasiness arises from this distinction for two reasons. First, many of the relevant texts have undergone such a complicated redactional process that it is not always easy to disentangle the historical threads of the Jewish text and Christian interpolations. Second, from a phenomenological perspective many of the themes central to Jewish apocalypticism are shared by Christian sources. It may even be suggested that one of the main components of the socio-religious matrix Christianity derived from was the apocalyptic tendency in later Hellenistic Judaism within Palestine.<sup>80</sup> This being the case, it is somewhat arbitrary to ignore Christian apocalypticism in a discussion of Jewish apocalyptic. Yet every portrait is limited by the boundaries of its canvas, and my canvas has been determined in such a way that a journey into the Christian sources would take us too far from the main focus of this chapter.

That vision of the divine form is central to apocalyptic writings in Judaism is evident from the one apocalypse included in the Hebrew biblical canon, the Book of Daniel. As I have already noted, in the seventh chapter of that work there is found an explicit and relatively elaborate description of the vision of the

<sup>76</sup> Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre." See also Gruenwald, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," esp. pp. 103–107; Hartman, "Survey of the Problem of Apocalyptic Genre," pp. 329–343; Sanders, "The Genre of Palestinian Jewish Apocalypses," pp. 447–460; Collins, "The Genre Apocalypse in Hellenistic Judaism," pp. 531–548.

<sup>77</sup> This theme has been discussed in many scholarly works. See, for example, Stone, "Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature"; Rowland, "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature"; idem, *The Open Heaven*, pp. 78–123, 358–402; Niditch, "The Visionary."

<sup>78</sup> Cf. G. Bornkamm, "μυστηριον," *TDNT* 4:815. See also D. Flusser, "Apocalypses," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 3: col. 179; Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, pp. 107–118; Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, pp. 9–32; and the section on "Pseudepigraphy, Inspiration, and Esotericism" in Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," pp. 427–433.

<sup>79</sup> On the nature of Christian apocalyptic as a distinctive type, see Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Phenomenon of Early Christian Apocalyptic."

<sup>80</sup> See Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 1:230, 239; 2:56, 71–72, 148–149, 242–261. See also E. Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," *Journal for Theology and the Church* 6 (1969): 40: "Apocalyptic was the mother of Christian theology."

Ancient of Days, obviously a technical reference to the enthroned divine form. Quite a bit of information is supplied concerning this form; in fact, there is no discernible effort on the part of the author to qualify the vision in any way. It is simply assumed that the apocalyptic visionary (Daniel) has seen the divine in this manner. From still other Jewish apocalyptic sources it is clear that the vision of God represents the climax of a heavenly ascent (often enough, later accounts draw upon Daniel 7,<sup>81</sup> as well as other biblical texts, most notably, Isa. 6:1–3 and Ezek. 1:26–27), although the clarity or accessibility of that vision is not left unchallenged by the widely accepted belief that no creature, angelic or human, can behold the luminous Presence of God. For example, in the theophany recorded in 1 Enoch 14:8–25—part of the “Book of Watchers” (1 Enoch 1–36), which we now know from the Aramaic fragments of 1 Enoch from Qumran (including the “Book of the Heavenly Luminaries,” 1 Enoch 72–82) is the earliest extant apocalypse, predating even the canonized book of Daniel,<sup>82</sup>—the apocalypticist unreservedly describes the enthroned form of God but at the same time emphasizes the inherent invisibility of that form:

And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne—its appearance was like crystal and its wheels like the shining sun. . . . It was difficult to look at it. And the Great Glory was sitting upon it—as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than snow. None of the angels was able to come in and see the face of the Excellent and Glorious One; and no one of the flesh can see him—the flaming fire was round about him, and a great fire stood before him. No one could come near unto him from among those that surrounded the tens of millions (that stood) before him. . . . Until then I was prostrate on my face covered and trembling. And the Lord called me with his own mouth and said to me, “Come near to me, Enoch, and to my holy Word.” And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I (continued) to look down with my face. (14:19–25)<sup>83</sup>

The author of this text sees a luminous figure on the throne in the shape of an anthropos (the divine glory, *dōxa*), and despite his claim that neither angel nor mortal can behold the enthroned glory, that is precisely what he is able to accomplish.<sup>84</sup> In a second passage in 1 Enoch 71 (the last chapter of the so-called “Similitudes of Enoch”) there is another elaborate description of the vision of God, as well as of the four archangels (Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Phanuel) and numerous other angels who surround the throne of glory. The actual description of the enthroned form of God is based on the language of Daniel’s epiphany: “With them is the Antecedent of Time [*’atiq yomin*]: His

<sup>81</sup> See Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John*.

<sup>82</sup> See Milik, *The Books of Enoch*; Stone, “The Book of Enoch and Judaism in the Third Century, B.C.E.”; Nickelsburg, “Enoch, Levi, and Peter.”

<sup>83</sup> Translated by E. Isaac in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y., 1983), 1:21 (hereafter *TOTP*).

<sup>84</sup> See Rowland, *Open Heaven*, p. 222. On the centrality of light imagery in the description of the divine glory in apocalyptic literature, see Aalen, *Die Begriffe ‘Licht’ und ‘Finsternis,’* pp. 195–202.

head is white and pure like wool and his garment is indescribable. I fell on my face, my whole body mollified and my spirit transformed" (71:10–11).<sup>85</sup> Here, too, one can discern the clash between the vision of the enthroned form (thus allowing for the description of his hair and the mentioning of his garment) and the overwhelming sense that such a vision is impossible (thus the visionary falls to the ground). It is of interest to note that Christopher Rowland cites the beginning of this chapter of 1 Enoch, "And I saw two streams of fire, and the light of that fire shone like hyacinth, and I fell on my face before the Lord of spirits," as evidence of the tendency in apocalyptic theophanies to move "away from the direct description of God and his throne."<sup>86</sup> While this opening statement may indicate a reluctance to speak of God's form, it is nevertheless the case that the continuation of this passage, cited above, is quite explicit in its description of that form, a description presumably resulting from a direct visual encounter.

In 2 Enoch one finds various references to the visionary experience of the divine form. In one context there is a brief allusion to the vision of the enthroned glory and the attending angels in the seventh heaven: "And they showed me from a distance the Lord, sitting in his throne. And all the heavenly armies assembled, according to their rank, advancing and doing obeisance to the Lord" (20:3).<sup>87</sup> In a subsequent chapter the vision is again mentioned: "I saw the Lord. His face was strong and very glorious and terrible. Who (is) to give an account of the dimensions of the being of the face of the Lord, strong and very terrible? . . . And I fell down flat and did obeisance to the Lord" (22:1–4).<sup>88</sup> The longer version of this text is even more elaborate in its detail of Enoch's visual encounter with the enthroned form of God:

And on the tenth heaven, Aravoth, I saw the view of the face of the Lord, like iron made burning hot in a fire and brought out, and it emits sparks and is incandescent. Thus even I saw the face of the Lord. But the face of the Lord is not to be talked about, it is so very marvelous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. And who am I to give an account of the incomprehensible being of the Lord, and of his face, so extremely strange and indescribable? . . . Who can give an account of his beautiful appearance, never changing and indescribable, and his great glory? And I fell down flat and did obeisance to the Lord. (22:1–4)<sup>89</sup>

One senses in this passage, especially in the longer recension but in the shorter one as well, the tension of the moment: standing before the face of God, yet being unable to describe or fathom it. The visionary falls down to worship God, but in the continuation we are told that he was summoned by God to rise and stand before the divine face; this is followed by an account of his transmutation into an angelic being. The reluctance here to speak of the form on the

<sup>85</sup> Rowland *Open Heaven*, p. 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> Translated by F. I. Andersen in *TOTP* 1:135.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

throne of glory shows the basic tension between the stated goal of the visionary, on the one hand, and the belief that such a vision is implicitly dangerous and therefore best avoided, on the other. What the apocalypticist assumes, however, is that there is a divine form with dimensions that are nevertheless too great for a human to measure. Thus in a third passage Enoch refers to his vision of God in even more graphic detail:

As for you, you hear my words, out of my lips, a human being created equal to yourselves; but I, I have heard the words from the fiery lips of the Lord. For the lips of the Lord are a furnace of fire, and his words are the fiery flames which come out. You my children, you see my face, a human being created just like yourselves; I, I am one who has seen the face of the Lord, like iron made burning hot by a fire, emitting sparks. For you gaze into my eyes, a human being created just like yourselves; but I have gazed into the eyes of the Lord, like rays of the shining sun and terrifying the eyes of a human being. You my children, you see my right hand beckoning you, a human being created identical to yourselves; but I, I have seen the right hand of the Lord, beckoning me, who fills heaven. You, you see the extent of my body, the same as your own; but I, I have seen the extent of the Lord, without measure and without analogy, who has no end. (39:1–6)<sup>90</sup>

Other apocalyptic texts attest to the tension outlined above. One text worthy of particular comment is in chapters 18–19 of the Apocalypse of Abraham, wherein there is a reworking of Ezekiel's chariot vision. Interestingly enough, in this context the anthropomorphic imagery is displaced from the visual to the auditory realm:

And while I was standing and watching, I saw behind the living creatures a chariot with fiery wheels. Each wheel was full of eyes round about. And above the wheels was the throne I had seen. And it was covered with fire and the fire encircled it round about, and an indescribable light surrounded the fiery crowd. And I heard the voice of their sanctification like the voice of a single man. And a voice came to me out of the midst of the fire. (18:12–19:1)<sup>91</sup>

A careful examination of each of the relevant passages in the respective literary contexts would demonstrate that there is reflected in the apocalyptic literature the basic tension that we have seen emerge from the various strata of the Hebrew Scriptures. On the one hand, there is a record of visions of the divine form; on the other, a significant effort is made to qualify, if not challenge entirely, just such a possibility. The issue here is not one of inconsistent or even contradictory thinking, nor is it a matter of textual discrepancies that reflect diverse hands over an extended and varied redactional process. It is rather the curious paradox central to the prophetic, apocalyptic, and, as will be seen in more detail below, mystical visionary texts: a God invisible renders himself

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 163. See Rowland, (*Open Heaven*, p. 85), who concludes that "this text comes closest to the extravagant descriptions of the limbs of God, the *shi'ur qomah* speculation" of later Jewish mystics.

<sup>91</sup> Translated by R. Rubinkiewicz in *TOTP* 1:698.

visible to select individuals. The one and the same divine reality who is not seen under ordinary circumstances can be seen by distinct persons in given moments of history.

## VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY OF GOD IN RABBINIC SOURCES

### *Theophanic Forms of God*

A careful scrutiny of the voluminous corpus of rabbinic writings from the classical period (roughly 200–600 C.E.) indicates that the rabbis developed their own theophanic traditions, based to a degree on the relevant biblical texts but in some cases going beyond them in their morphological detail. In this section I would like to discuss several key traditions that, in my view, represent the most important claims for the imaging of God in human form in the rabbinic sources. Let me state emphatically that I make no pretense in the following of exhausting the relevant comments in the many rabbinic documents at our disposal, nor do I claim any sweeping generalizations about the rabbinic sources. There is no attempt here to present a comprehensive review of such a vast corpus. Rather, I have isolated various tradition-complexes that span several centuries of redacted rabbinic texts. Despite the fact that some of the midrashic texts to be discussed are relatively late—that is, from the post-classical period—it is evident that there is a discernible trajectory connected with the traditions that I have isolated regarding the visual imagining of God in iconic form. Precisely such traditions, moreover, were reshaped and reformulated by later Jewish mystics. My principle of selection has therefore been determined by a forward glance into the mystical literature. I am interested in highlighting the rabbinic passages that provided the grist for the mill of subsequent interpreters.

The explicit preference accorded the visual/iconic element of revelation over the auditory/verbal is expressed succinctly in the midrashic compilation *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, generally considered to contain traditions of tannaitic authorities from the first and second centuries C.E., on the book of Exodus: “[The Israelites] said [to Moses]: It is our desire to see our king, for the one who hears cannot be compared to one who sees.”<sup>92</sup> That some of the rabbinic authorities assumed that the anthropomorphic manifestation of God in concrete, visible forms was a basic part of biblical faith is especially highlighted in another passage from the same midrashic collection, where one finds a discussion concerning various epiphanies and their respective axiological frame of reference:

“The Lord is a man of war” (Exod. 15:3). Why is this said? For at the sea He appeared as a warrior doing battle, as it says, “The Lord is a man of war.” At Sinai

<sup>92</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Bahodesh, 2, pp. 210–211. For other sources that utilize the proverb “hearing is not like seeing,” see Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 6:33 n. 191.