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FACE OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Rev. **IOAN CHIRILĂ**

The Face of God in the Old Testament

The Face of God in the Old Testament

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In Old Testament theology, the concepts of "face" and "presence of God" are essential for understanding the relationship between the people of Israel and God. The Hebrew word פָּנִים (*panim*), often translated as „face," encompasses more than just physical appearance; it embodies a range of meanings related to feelings and emotions. These nuances highlight the complexity of the relationship between God and humanity, revealing the divine nature. In Scripture, the "face of God" is a powerful metaphor for His living and dynamic presence. For instance, when Moses speaks to God „face to face," it emphasizes the intimacy and closeness of a direct relationship with the Divine. This imagery suggests not only God's loving accessibility but also His mystery and authority, as directly seeing YHWH is inaccessible and dangerous for ordinary mortals, underscoring His transcendent holiness. Moreover, the "face of God" symbolizes divine blessing and favour. When God "turns His face" toward someone, it signifies goodwill, faithfulness, and protection. Conversely, when He "hides His face," it suggests disapproval or withdrawal of His presence. Thus, these biblical images reflect not only the dynamics of divine relationships but also the emotional depth of human interaction with the sacred. Therefore, the concept of the "face of God" in the Old Testament is not merely a literary expression; it is a fundamental theological element that continues to inspire and guide the spirituality of believers. It calls them to seek and cultivate an authentic and vibrant relationship with their Creator, emphasizing that this relationship transcends physical limits and deeply penetrates the heart of the believer's spiritual existence.

The Hebrew word *panim* originates from the root *panah*, which means "to turn" or "to return." This etymological background underscores the concept of a shift in direction, focus, or orientation towards someone or something. In biblical texts, the term appears nearly 400 times, carrying a variety of meanings and nuances. On one hand, *panim* can refer simply to the physical direction one faces towards a person or

object. On the other hand, it also conveys emotional states, feelings, and attitudes. For instance, a "bright" face can indicate joy, happiness, or appreciation, while turning away or hiding one's face may reflect disgust, rejection, or even divine wrath. In a divine context, the "face of God" serves as a profound symbol of God's attributes, such as mercy, love, justice, or severity. Thus, the divine face is not merely an aesthetic symbol; it represents a true manifestation of God's presence and the state of the divine soul. It encapsulates both the closeness and distance that can exist between God and humanity, functioning as a means of communication and revelation. Overall, the term *panim* underscores the complexity of the relationship between divinity and humanity, reflecting not only the physical aspects but also the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the divine presence.

In the Scriptures, the face of God symbolizes a profound and significant means of communication between the divine and humanity. This concept goes beyond a mere physical expression; it represents Yahweh's inner state, reflecting His true feelings and intentions. Just as a human face conveys a wide range of emotions—such as joy, love, anger, and disgust—the face of God serves as a channel through which these emotions and attitudes are clearly communicated. For instance, when God turns His face away or hides His gaze, these actions symbolize either closeness or rejection. Edmond Jacob emphasizes that the divine face should not be interpreted literally. Instead, it should be understood as a symbol of God's total presence, encompassing all His emotions and desires for communion with humanity. Thus, it reflects both mercy and love, as well as anger and justice, serving as a surface for the intimate and dynamic relationship between the Divine Spirit and created beings. From this perspective, the face of God is essential for understanding divine love and His desire to reveal Himself personally and directly to believers. It symbolizes His sincerity, closeness, and holiness.

The search for the face of Yahweh is a fundamental aspect of Old Testament religion, reflecting the desire for a personal and authentic relationship with the divine. In the Psalms, believers frequently offer prayers and supplications, asking God to turn His face of benevolence toward them. This signifies a longing for divine blessing, support, and protection. This expression not only conveys the need for assistance and the outpouring of grace but also the aspiration to draw closer to God, who is understood as a living and engaged presence in the lives of believers. The face of God, particularly in the context of personal worship and prayer, symbolizes a direct and individualized encounter with the Creator. This notion transcends mere poetic imagery; it embodies a profound

desire to be in communion with God, experiencing His presence in tangible ways. Consequently, prayer and worship become means of asking God to reveal His face, facilitating blessings and spiritual transformation. In this relationship, the divine face serves as a symbol of complete closeness, sincere dialogue, and mutual openness between humanity and God. This strengthens the faith that divinity is not distant, but rather near, and ready to reveal itself to those who earnestly seek it.

Several biblical accounts, such as Moses' conversation with God in Exodus and Jacob's encounter with the divine at Peniel, illustrate the concept of direct and personal communion between humanity and God. These experiences represent moments of profound revelation, in which "seeing the face of God" symbolizes intimate knowledge and a direct encounter with the divine presence. In the case of Moses, his face-to-face dialogue with God and his yearning to see God's glory emphasize the desire for complete closeness to penetrate the mystery of the divine presence. Similarly, Jacob's experience at Peniel signifies his belief that he had a direct encounter with God and was saved, reflecting a moment of profound spiritual intimacy. However, these accounts also underscore the limits of this communion. Tradition holds that not every mortal can see God's face and live, as His greatness and holiness are transcendent and beyond the reach of the average human being. This distinction highlights the fundamental difference between the divine and human natures. Generally, the most significant accounts of divine vision are moments of limited revelation, in which God either "passes by" or "hides His face" to preserve His mystery and immortal holiness.

Throughout history, theological developments in Judaism have sought to reconcile the idea of God's personal presence with the need to preserve His invisible and transcendent nature. In this evolving process, the notions of angels and divine glory became symbols and means of manifesting divinity, gradually replacing the direct concept of God's presence as the primary expression of the divine. Angels, as messengers or envoys of God, serve as representations of His presence in the visible world, helping to preserve the divine mystery and preventing a reduction of God to an anthropomorphic image. The concept of divine glory (*kabod*) has been understood as a manifestation of God's splendour and greatness, conveying that God makes Himself present in ways that exceed human understanding while maintaining His unmatched holiness. This shift allowed believers to retain the divine mystery, steering clear of constructing an anthropomorphic image of God, which could diminish His holy and mysterious nature. Rather than relying on a direct and visible manifestation, these symbols became conduits

for spiritual closeness and communion, while continuing to uphold deep respect for God's divine holiness and incomprehensible nature. Thus, theology has evolved toward a more nuanced and respectful vision of the human relationship with God, preserving both the mystery and transcendence of the divine.

The concept of the "face of God" in the Old Testament is rich with nuances and meanings, reflecting the divine presence, generosity, holiness, and mystery that characterize Yahweh. Understanding this aspect of divinity provides insight into how the people of ancient Israel perceived and interacted with God. The "face of God" is more than just a metaphor; it represents a profound expression of the direct and personal relationship between humanity and the divine. This concept underscores mankind's longing to experience God's presence in everyday life, emphasizing both His closeness and His holiness. As Jewish theology evolved, the idea of a divinity that can be seen or felt became more nuanced. It recognizes that while God reveals Himself through love and mercy, He also remains an unfathomable mystery to human understanding. This tension between accessibility and transcendence is central to humanity's ongoing dialogue with the divine, challenging generations of believers to seek a deeper understanding and a more intimate relationship with their Creator. Consequently, the "face of God" symbolizes the presence that guides and enriches the lives of believers in the Old Testament and beyond.

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ORTHODOX EXEGESIS

The Image and Face of God – Manifestations of Divine Love that renew the Human Nature

Abstract

This study explores the depth of biblical and patristic concepts of the face and image of God, emphasizing their profound connection to human renewal and becoming like God through divine revelation. The analysis focuses on the interpretation of the terms "tselem" and "panim," which represent, respectively, the divine image in humans and the personal approach to God—an evolution involving inner transformation and participation in the life of the Trinity. It stresses that understanding this mystery requires going beyond external symbols and material forms to the heart of the Logos and the great mystery of love and communion revealed by Scripture. Drawing on the theological insights of the Church Fathers and contemporary theologians, it affirms that true likeness to God involves active, conscious participation in divine life through the grace of the Holy Spirit, as part of the process of spiritual "renewal." In this view, humans become an "imago Dei" in a real, not merely formal, sense and partake in the eternal light of the Most Holy Trinity, effectively becoming "temple of God." The study also explores the process of spiritual "transfiguration" described by patristic writings, which enables the soul and body to become eternal in Christ and continuous union with God. Through this theological perspective, it emphasizes that the image and face of God are not only symbols but living, participatory realities that reveal the ultimate destiny of human creation—returning to the divine origin in love and truth—until the fullness of the likeness of God is realized.

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Keywords

Face, Image, Likeness, Pnevmatization, Renewal

Introduction

The relationship between the concepts of the image of God and the face of God is central in biblical teaching, holding multiple meanings and interpretations. The concepts of "face" (Heb. צלם – *tselem*) and "face" (Heb. פנים – *panim*) are symbolic expressions of divine reflection in humans. The "face" associates humans with the image of God, as Psalms 8:5-6 states: man was made "a little lower than God (Elohim)" (Kraus 1993, 179). This suggests that, through creation, humans contain a reproduction of divine traits, a privileged position in creation, and a likeness in both form and function (Gerhard Von Rad 1967, 145). This likeness relates to moral stature and the potential for sharing in divine life. The "face" of God symbolizes revelation, closeness, and personal contact with the divine. In the Old Testament, the "face of God" becomes a symbol of divine presence and love, as well as a hidden revelation that is gradually revealed through faith and wisdom. This "face" is not simply a physical expression but a sign of intimate communication between God and humans. In Orthodox theology, this closeness can be understood as part of the theology of likeness, where the goal is not just external reproduction but inner transformation and genuine participation in the divine nature.

From the Church Fathers' perspective, likeness to God implies a union with God, an act of spiritualization and overcoming formal limitations to achieve a profound unity in love and grace. The concept of "image" thus becomes crucial for understanding the human mission: humans not only carry within them an image of divinity but must nurture and develop it throughout their lives. Additionally, considering the name YHWH, "I am that I am," which is directly linked to the verb "to be," it highlights that God is not merely a static being, but rather has an essential and eternal existence. This also relates the "image" and the "face" to a continuous and participatory presence of the divine in human life. In this view, the relationship with God is not just about formal or symbolic elements. Still, it involves a conscious, living participation, through which humans increasingly resemble God to fulfil their potential in grace and truth. Therefore, the concepts of God's "face" and "likeness" are not merely symbols of representation but reflect an intimate and reflective communion, where likeness to God becomes the highest aim of human life, expressed in the theology of likeness as active participation in the divine life.

The present study is organized into several sections, each addressing a key aspect of the central theme: the relationship between the image and face of God and the

process of human spiritual renewal. It begins by introducing the biblical and patristic concept of the divine face and Image, analysing the significance of the concepts "tselem" and "panim" and emphasizing the close relationship between God and humanity. The second part examines the transcendence of outward forms through spiritual wisdom, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of pnevmatization and the realization of the divine image in humans, inspired by the teachings of Church Fathers such as St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Macarius the Egyptian, and St. Gregory Palamas. The final section discusses the concept of "renewal" and becoming like God, integrating theological views on the processes of "theosis" and "homotheos," and outlining the stages of participation and spiritual transformation. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of this journey of rediscovering our true divine identity and invites conscious involvement in the process of fulfilment in Christ, in Spirit, and the divine truth.

Beyond form – spiritual transcendence through the image and face of God

The spiritual morphology of God's face and Image is a profound and captivating topic of debate, with biblical theology at its centre. Its goal is to help those receiving revelation to go beyond mere form and delve into the very essence of the Logos. In my past experiences and reflections on anthropological terms (Chirilă 2009, 49-64; Chirilă 2002, 134-42), I often used the concept of "morfi"—the essential form—to highlight the importance of embarking on a spiritual journey, as suggested by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in his studies on anthropology (Ware 1996, 48-63). This journey involves key steps: developing a relationship with God, fostering spiritual growth, cultivating self-awareness, and ultimately achieving spiritual freedom. However, simply recognizing the "morfi," the form, is not enough. The concept of "pnevmati" must also be included to indicate our actual point of convergence with God—a realm of the Spirit, a drawing near through serving the Holy Spirit, sharing and targeting the Spirit until we truly live in the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who causes all things to flourish and bear fruit (St. Basil the Great 1986, 92); all creation is quietly uplifted to heaven under His gentle influence.

St. Irenaeus of Lyon emphasizes that all things are created by the "two arms" of God—the Son and the Holy Spirit—implying that everything bears within it the logosic imprint of the Son and the spiritual imprint of the Spirit. It is a world born from the Image and animated by the Spirit, confirming St. Justin Popovich's concept of

"logonost" (St. Justin Popovich 1997, 45). Avva Dorotheos' words become clearer in this light: "God made man in His image, that is, immortal, self-possessed, adorned with all the fullness of God's image" (Avva Dorotheos of Gazei 2020, 27) (our translations). This statement highlights attributes that suggest divine likeness ultimately involves the fullness of human pnevmatization —the state of being "alike-to-God" (*homotheos*). Therefore, in anthropological discourse, it is crucial to restore this expressive essence of our being in its complete form and ongoing eschatological development. I propose relating the concepts articulated by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware to those of St. Justin Popovich, following the structure: human relationship or feeling—as a feeling of God, an unbroken communion with Christ; and growth—analysed through the lens of the Logos becoming flesh and elevating the human body to a glory surpassing that of angels, strengthening the bond between the soul and its Creator.

As we deepen our self-knowledge, our thinking shifts toward God-Logos incarnate, rediscovering its reason (*logos*), meaning (*noema*), and full significance (*pannoema*) (St. Justin Popovich 1997, 58-9; Ware 1996, 51). Freedom, in this sense, is reflected in the incarnation of the Logos, who became fully human. It is worthwhile to add to these thoughts the perspective of St. Maximus the Confessor, who offers a valuable insight into how humans open themselves to transcendence. St. Maximus describes the steps of the spirit toward the higher, of deepening in contemplation and wisdom, of how our reason and understanding become habits of unwavering contemplation, culminating in true wisdom. These reflections lead us to see man as a transcendental being, fulfilled and perfected through participation in divinity. In other words, the process of spiritual transformation is not simply an exchange of ideas or theories, but a profound experience—a return to the origins, a movement back to that primordial state of perfect communion with God (St. Maximus the Confessor 2017, 33).

St. Maximus the Confessor's reflections on the mind give us further insight into this spiritual journey (St. Maximus the Confessor 2017, 36, 91, 96, 99, 100, 102, 136) According to him, the steps that follow reason and understanding are the apprehension, the ability to discern truth, and finally, the error-free contemplation that leads to wisdom. All this is part of a process of opening towards transcendence, of unifying man with the divine. This spiritual journey is, in essence, a regression to the communion that existed before the Fall, when man lived in perfect union with his Creator. It is a journey of rediscovering and returning to our identity, that identity of being created in the image and likeness of God, destined to live in eternal communion with him.

Spiritual morphology encourages us to go beyond mere exteriority and to go deeper into the spiritual process of our becoming. It is an inner journey that passes through all levels of existence, ultimately reaching that fullness of life in the Spirit, a life lived "with God", reflecting his image and glory. Man's process of becoming human can thus be seen as a holistic one, where every aspect of life is permeated and transformed by divine love and presence. This transformation is not just a theological theme, but a living reality—a call to our active and conscious participation in eternal life.

From Image to Likeness or on the perfection of man in Christ through the Spirit

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's work on the uniqueness of the human person deeply explores the mysterious theme of man as a "mystery," an ancient yet always new idea rooted in biblical revelation and patristic tradition. Central to this reflection are the insights from St. John's Revelation, which declare that Christ will give each person a white stone with a new name inscribed on it (Rev 2:17). This image represents the fact that, across ages, each human being harbours a profound mystery within—a secret shared only with God, reflecting an identity and existence that transcend external perception and even conscious understanding. To grasp this mystery, one must focus on the relationship—a fundamental yet often subtle and complex concept—between man and God. Ware emphasizes clearly that the biblical phrase "in our image" (Heb. בְּצַלְמֵנוּ – *betsalmenu*, Gn 1:26-27) shows that man cannot be reduced to external qualities or seen as an independent, self-sufficient entity. Despite the modern view of the individual as a unity, Christianity always presents man to God, fellow human beings, and all creation, modeled on Trinitarian love. This "wholeness" is not merely about existing in the same space or time but about existing in communion—within a vital relationship—where the human being recognizes and fulfils their identity only through this connection (Ware 1996, 51). This foundational relationship in biblical and patristic theology is further illustrated by the expression כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ (*kidmuthenu*) – *likeness*. Suppose we interpret the particle "ki" as a demonstrative. In that case, this phrase indicates that the true mystery between each person and Christ—symbolized by the inscription on the white stone (Rev. 2:17)—transcends direct expression. It is an unwritten, deeply hidden mystery that only God fully knows but that humans can come to understand as they grow in likeness to Christ through the process of "pnevmatization."

This becomes clearer when we realize that between these two realities, man and God, there is a correspondence, a profound bond, a closeness achieved through service, seeking, and sharing of the Holy Spirit, culminating in living in the Spirit, illuminated by divine eternity.

Through this lens of relationship, the process of spiritual growth becomes a continuous fulfilment of the "ethos of triune communion" (Yannaras 2003, 16), that is, participation in the mutual self-giving between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while each human being becomes a *templum Dei*, a temple of God, as if it were a small cosmos permeated by the divine presence. In this perspective, human existence is no longer simply a question of identity or social identity. Still, it becomes an act of continual participation in divine life, a perpetual renewal in the light of Trinitarian love. This high view of human nature finds its support in the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Macarius the Egyptian, who affirm that "every intelligent creature is created in the image of God, but only the *kalokagatic*, that is, the good and wise, is truly in his likeness" (St. Macarius the Egyptian, *On The Love III.25*, in *PG* 90:1024C – Ware 1996, 56). This differentiation between the created and the virtuous, between the created and the perfect being, emphasizes that the likeness of God is not an automatic gift, but a goal and a calling, which is realized in the process of human sanctification and ascetical work. Resemblance, in the most profound sense, presupposes an active and conscious participation in the spiritual life, in the grace which transforms us and raises us to the status of "homotheos" – of people in the image and likeness of God.

St. Justin Popovich emphasizes this idea when he speaks of the "mystical triad of virtues enriched by grace," noting that the soul's mystical relationship with Christ increases to "the measure of the conjugal intimacy of the bridegroom with the bride" (St. Justin Popovich 2014, 159). In this framework, Christ becomes the Bridegroom of the soul, and the soul His Bride – a profoundly spiritual union, a hierogamy, an infusion of divinity into the human being. This expresses the most beautiful and all-encompassing idea of knowing God as a sacramental and mystical encounter, culminating in the experience of "da'at YHWH/Elohim" – divine knowledge in its highest and most intimate form.

The one who progresses in this knowledge reaches what Metropolitan Kallistos Ware calls "the meaning or meaning of the image": self-awareness, the awareness of identity as a being created in the image and likeness of God. However, the most profound and most comprehensive meaning of this fulfilment is found in the teachings

of the Church Fathers, especially in the writings of St. Maximus the Confessor and in the reflections of St. Dumitru Stăniloae. In the introduction to the third volume of the Romanian Philocalia, the author outlines the eight stages of human growth in theosis—that is, in spiritual resurrection and fulfilment. These stages can be summarized as follows: Thought or mind – man's face, his true manifestation as a spiritual being. The mind becomes a mirror reflecting the glory of the Logos within himself and in creation, like a new Moses who sees the face of God. Withdrawal of the mind from feeling, through the spirit, to make room for the material and passionate darkness of the human being, preparing it for union with the divine. The struggle for deliverance – from all material impurity and the patterns of the old world, to restore human nature to its original state and to regain reason and mind as organs of union with God. The active restoration of the human being—renewing reason and inner wisdom, reestablishing the channel of communication with the divine. Rational perception – in the soul, where the concrete experience of living in the divine light and the divine reason of the world is revealed. This marks the first victory of the spirit in man, encountering divine truth's light. Natural contemplation is a form of simple, intuitive, non-deductive knowledge, a spiritual perspective on the world, and a view of divine reality that emphasizes clarity and simplicity of understanding. Mystical death or complete sabbath – renouncing positive knowledge of God in favour of total emptiness, cleansing the being of all created content to be filled solely by God. Attainment of the shining state – when the soul becomes a transparent conduit for divine energy, the "shining medium of divine energies," thus making the human being a true temple of divinity (Stăniloae 2017, 14-20).

This process not only concludes at the individual level but also extends to the entirety of human existence. The one who reaches this state of spiritual elevation no longer lives in isolation but gradually partakes in "an aerial world" (Stăniloae 2017, 20), bathed in the light of Christ, which is also a supernatural reality full of peace and divine love. St. Gregory Palamas describes this state when he says: "This is the integral man, the total person – body, soul, and spirit together – participating in the display of divine light, for the divine energies transfigure not only our inner being but also our physicality" (Ware 1996, 59). Therefore, the concept of the "total person" in the teachings of the Church Fathers is not without theological basis: it is the unity realized between the spirit, the divine breath, and the physical nature of the body. In this ultimate unity, man becomes an icon of God, an "imago Dei" in the most profound sense, reflecting the image of God, Christ, within his being. In this context, as St. Maximus states, man has

ascended to the height of participating in divinity. To be in the likeness of God means, therefore, to live this union, this solidarity of all levels of being, by "being in the image" of God.

This lived experience of the human being as a "temple of God"—as a forgetting of limitations and as a manifestation of the fact that man, in all his aspects, becomes a fuller reflection of the divine dimension—is the goal of the highest and final stage in the theology of obedience and sanctification. Throughout this process, biblical revelation points us to the understanding that the terms "in our image" and "in our likeness" are not merely traditional formulas, but rather indicators of an existential reality in which human creation, in all its complexity, must become a bearer and manifestation of the divine image. Thus, even if the human being retains a profound mystery – a mysterious, dependent relationship with God—this mystery does not remain just an enigma. Instead, it becomes a call to perfection, to ongoing renewal in the light of Christ, and active participation in divine life. In the rich patristic and theological perspective, man is not only "created in the image" but also "created to be like," and this likeness is realized through the process of becoming, within the "eternal life" that begins already in this life.

This wisdom revealed by Scripture and deepened by patristic theology shows us, therefore, that man is called to total communion with God, a communion which involves not only the acceptance of Christ as Savior, but also the deepest and highest participation in the life of God – a becoming, in a sense, in the image and likeness of God in this life and the next. To be a person in the most authentic sense means to live in this relationship of love, of self-giving and sharing, thus becoming, truly becoming, "templum Dei" and the eternal reflection of divine light.

From Image to Face: filling creation with the Spirit and revealing the Face of God

In the revelations of the Old and New Testaments, a triad of divine persons is emphasized, each exemplifying the three core concepts mentioned: the image, the face, and the iconography of salvation, all aimed at the pnevmatization of man and creation. This triad's goal is to transform and renew both humanity and the world, shaping that "aerial world" of St. Maximus, *enaerios kosmos* – a reality where the Holy Spirit fills and harmonizes matter, not by consuming or destroying it, but by enriching it with divine life – the pleasant fragrance of the Spirit, a marvel of spiritual elevation. The principal figures representing this triad are Jacob-Israel, Moses, and Jesus Christ. Jacob, who bears

the name Israel, meaning "he who wrestles with God," signifies the process of growth and spiritual struggle to become like God. Moses, as the bearer of the Law, symbolizes self-awareness and the gift of the Law, eternally inscribed on the "fleshly tablets of our hearts," embedded in the deep structure of human nature. Finally, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, embodies the highest expression of divine freedom, grace, and the culmination of revelation: He is the perfect icon of God, unveiling the fullness of the mystery of salvation. Spiritual growth involves ongoing effort, as seen in the Peniel episode (Gn 32), alongside deep self-awareness reinforced by the divine law written in the heart. At the same time, true freedom is not dependent on birth or circumstances but on divine grace—the presence of Christ in the heart—which transforms the soul into a temple of heavenly light. The mystery of the divine face is revealed in Christ, because through Him, all these aspects are fulfilled: the divine image, self-knowledge, and spiritual freedom. St. Justin Popovich asserts that Christ, by being born of His deity, simplifies the entire salvation to this act of divine birth, which causes all who are born to be fashioned after His image: "The Lord Christ reduces the whole iconomy of salvation to the birth from His deity - *ek tis avtou Theotitos* — from the very seed of deity, because in the sons who are born of the seed of Christ Christ is imagined/formed, modeled – *emorfoti* – Christ" (St. Justin Popovich 2014, 153). Thus, the human soul ultimately becomes a space of encounter between God and creation, between image and face, between icon and reality, where the Holy Spirit penetrates and renews the heavenly image, transforming it into the fragrant goodness of divinity. In this view, actual spiritual "growth" and "freedom" are rooted in the presence and work of the Spirit, through Christ, within the soul and the world at large.

The Mystery of the Face of God – renewal and likeness in the Holy Spirit

The mystery of God's image and face is one of the deepest and most profound aspects of divine revelation. It is fundamentally an effort to understand and explore the nature of the intimate relationship between God and humanity. This mystery cannot be fully uncovered if we limit ourselves to analysing external forms, sounds, and symbols that accompany its verbal or visual expressions. Searching for a superficial or formal meaning only narrows our ability to grasp divine truths. Instead, a deep exploration—an investigation of divine meanings and hidden truths within scriptural texts—requires going beyond appearances and the boundaries of language and form to uncover the true significance of these concepts, especially concerning the face and Image.

The presence of Christ within the human signifies both a restoration of God's face and a transformation of the heart. During renewal, the human being enters a state of complete rebirth, being united with the Trinity. This act of transfiguration and renewal does not eliminate individuality or the unique divine-human nature but rather elevates it, guiding it toward "a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). In this state, the individual becomes, in a mysterious way, a reflection of divine life—both human and divine—forming a more profound unity between creation and the Creator. From this viewpoint, the concepts of image and likeness acquire a new meaning: they no longer refer to external appearance or simple comparison but to a profound reality—an act of restorative reciprocity where the panim, the face of God, becomes shared by both God and man. This is achieved through the work of the Holy Spirit, who enters the soul and mind, renewing and transforming them into the divine image. In this relationship, God's face is no longer just a symbol or theological idea but a living, active reality that becomes visible and perceptible within the inner being of the transformed person.

An essential element in this process is the wisdom and self-awareness that crystallize in obedience to the divine law, not as an external constraint, but as a reflection of the fact that man has received a new identity through the Word of God. This means that man, because of the process of becoming deified, no longer lives separately from God, but becomes a reflection of the divine work in the material world. At the same time, this union does not erase man's unique character but transforms him, enabling him to participate in the mystery and communion of the divine.

The mystery of God's face is most deeply revealed in Christ, who not only bears the image and face of the Father but also, through His incarnation, makes it possible for every human being to be like God. In Him, who is the perfect image of the Father, this idea of divine iconomy is fulfilled, through whom the human can attain complete likeness to God. St. Justin Popovich affirms that, from His birth from deity, Christ reduces the entire salvation to this birth, to this birth from His deity, highlighting the fundamental role of union with Him in the process of human transformation. This union with Christ, from a theological perspective, achieves what we can call the "renewal of the image" in the human soul. As man conforms himself and consciously and willingly participates in the grace of salvation, the divine image is rekindled and transformed, and the face of God—that is, the divine presence and light—becomes an integral part of his being.

In this union, the soul becomes the "place" where the divine presence is manifested and where the work of restoration is carried out.

According to Orthodox teaching, this state of human transformation is also reflected in how man experiences and perceives reality: the soul becomes a "temple of the Holy Spirit," and this transformation works silently and continuously within it. In this process, man no longer needs to seek external expressions of his identity but lives in direct contact with the face of God, in the light and glory of the divine presence. Therefore, the profound meaning of the image and face of God is to represent the real and living presence and likeness of God within the human being as a work of the Holy Spirit. Panim, or the divine face, becomes for the Christian an "oasis" of light, a guiding encounter in the search for truth, life, and divine communion. From this perspective, God's face and Image are not just symbols of divine relationship with humanity but the living manifestation of divine love, which brings life and renewal to the human being, granting him his identity: that of a child of God, made in His image and likeness.

Conclusions

The study highlights the profound significance of the relationship between the image and the face of God in biblical and patristic theological thought. Without reducing these symbols to mere externals, it is emphasized that they are living, participatory, and dynamic realities, expressing the ultimate and highest goal of human existence: likeness to God.

In the process of pnevmatization and spiritual renewal, man not only bears the divine image but also realizes it through the work of the Holy Spirit, in a continual touch of divine love and presence in his heart. Spiritual transformation is not just personal evolution but active and conscious participation in Trinitarian life, culminating in complete and authentic union with God. On an ontological level, man becomes "imago Dei" in a tangible form, called to live as a "templum Dei," a sacred place where the divine presence is made concrete and visible.

This transfiguring union does not destroy individuality but rather divinizes and fulfils it in love, becoming a reflection of divine light. From this perspective, the image and the face of God become symbols of a living and participatory reality, and man's destiny is to return to his divine origin in love and truth.

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Statue de YHWH ou aniconisme dans le premier temple ?

Résumé

Selon les Écritures, Dieu est transcendant, nul ne peut voir sa face et vivre, ce qui implique qu'aucune forme ou caractéristique personnelle ne peut lui être attribuée, encore moins sous forme de statue ou de représentations artistiques (icônes). Cependant, l'Ancien Testament ne se limite pas toujours à des affirmations catégoriques. En se concentrant sur l'analyse du deuxième commandement du Décalogue, cet article cherche à démontrer que l'interdiction de toute image cultuelle pour représenter YHWH n'était pas initialement aussi absolue. Le commandement pourrait suggérer l'existence d'une statue de YHWH dans le temple de Jérusalem au moins pendant la période monarchique. Le choix de cet exemple est motivé par l'utilisation de ce commandement lors de la controverse iconoclaste dans l'Empire byzantin aux VIII[e] et IX[e] siècles, lorsque le culte des icônes fut interprété comme une forme d'idolâtrie.

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Mots-clés

Bible hébraïque, Septante, Pentateuque, פֶּסֶל, *εἴδωλον*, תְּמוּנָה, *ὁμοίωμα*, statue cultuelle de YHWH

L'interdit aniconique dans la *Torah* [1]

La question posée dans le titre de cet article peut surprendre si l'on prend en compte le deuxième commandement du Décalogue [2] :

> Tu ne te feras pas d'idole, ni rien qui ait la forme de ce qui se trouve au ciel là-haut, sur terre ici-bas ou dans les eaux sous la terre. Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant ces dieux et tu ne les serviras pas, car c'est moi le Seigneur, ton Dieu, un Dieu exigeant, poursuivant la faute des pères chez les fils sur trois et quatre générations – s'ils me haïssent (Ex 20,4-5) [3].

Ce commandement est souvent renforcé par ce que Dieu dit expressément à Moïse : « Tu ne peux pas voir ma face, car l'homme ne saurait me voir et vivre » (Ex 33,20) [4]. Ailleurs, Moïse déclare au peuple : « Et le Seigneur vous a parlé du milieu du feu : une voix parlait, et vous l'entendiez, mais vous n'aperceviez aucune forme, il n'y avait rien d'autre que la voix » (Dt 4,12) [5].

Selon ces versets des Saintes Écritures, Dieu demeure absolument transcendant et invisible, de sorte qu'aucune forme ou caractéristique personnelle ne peut être concrétisée sous forme de statue ou de représentation iconique.

Cependant, l'Ancien Testament (AT) n'est pas toujours aussi catégorique et ne se réduit pas à des interdictions incontestables. Par exemple, Dieu se laisse voir par les patriarches, parle « face à face » avec Moïse, se révèle sous des formes de plus en plus surprenantes dans les théophanies (nuée, tremblement de terre, feu, anges etc.). Les prophètes affirment l'avoir vu et le Psalmiste aspire à contempler la face de Dieu dans le temple de Jérusalem [6]. Bien entendu, ces références peuvent être considérées comme de simples comparaisons, des récits allégoriques, des expressions métaphoriques ou des images symboliques par lesquelles l'AT exprime la manière dont Dieu rentre en contact avec le monde et se révèle aux hommes. Toutefois, il ne faut pas oublier que les Saintes Écritures reflètent une culture très différente de la nôtre. Notre époque impose incontestablement ses propres paramètres pour comprendre la vision de Dieu par l'homme dans l'AT et la manière dont il y est représenté. Dans tous ces récits bibliques, ainsi que dans bien d'autres, il est évident pour les interlocuteurs que Dieu avait un visage. L'aspect singulier de ces récits réside précisément dans le fait que Dieu permettait aux mortels de le voir [7]. Cette affirmation peut être complétée par des arguments historiques, archéologiques et scripturaires.

De nombreux historiens des religions considèrent que YHWH (en hébreu, tétragramme יהוה) est présenté dans l'AT avec des attributs empruntés à d'autres divinités du Proche-Orient ancien, notamment des divinités météorologiques et solaires [8]. Dans le livre de l'Exode, par exemple, YHWH est décrit comme un dieu de l'orage et un guerrier (cf. Ex 15) – des caractéristiques également présentes chez le dieu égyptien Seth. Les deux taureaux de Béthel et de Dan (cf. 1 R 12,27-29), censés représenter YHWH dans le royaume du Nord, sont conçus à la manière d'El, le dieu suprême des Cananéens [9]. De plus, la Bible offre un large éventail de qualificatifs attribués à YHWH, tels que « roi », « guerrier », « juge », « père », « berger » etc. Bien

que ces qualificatifs ne visent pas à fournir des informations sur son apparence physique, ils montrent clairement que YHWH était compris de manière anthropomorphique [10].

Les sources archéologiques semblent également fournir des preuves soutenant les représentations iconiques de YHWH. Une image sur un vase découvert à Kuntillet Ajrud, dans le nord du désert du Sinaï, daté du VIII^e^ siècle av. J.C., montre un personnage masculin à côté d'un personnage féminin, accompagnée d'une inscription généralement traduite par les spécialistes avec : « par YHWH et Ashera » [11]. Une monnaie de la période achéménide (550-330 av. J.C.), frappée en Judée avec la légende en alphabet paléo-hébraïque YHD (nom araméen de la province de Yehud dans le premier Empire perse), représente une divinité suprême sous la forme d'un personnage assis sur un trône, ailé, avec une roue et un faucon prêt à s'envoler. Bien que ces inscriptions et images permettent diverses interprétations, certains chercheurs les considèrent comme des représentations iconiques appropriées de YHWH.

En ce qui concerne les arguments scripturaires, certains exégètes estiment que le désir du Psalmiste de « voir la face » de YHWH (cf. Ps 17TM[16LXX],15 ; 42TM[41LXX],3) pourrait renvoyer, d'une manière ou d'une autre, à une image de celui-ci dans le temple de Jérusalem [12]. D'autres soutiennent qu'aux siècles précédant et suivant l'exil babylonien (entre les VII^e^ et IV^e^ siècles av. J.C.), il existait une tendance à représenter YHWH sous des formes abstraites ou symboliques, par exemple le feu (cf. Gn 15,17 ; Ex 3), la lumière (cf. Ex 25 ; 37) et le trône vide (cf. 1 R 4,4 ; Es 37,16 ; Ez 10,18). La splendeur de la gloire de Dieu (cf. Ex 16,10) et son nom (cf. Dt 12,10-11) sont également considérés comme des expressions symboliques supplémentaires de la manifestation ou de la présence de YHWH, pouvant avoir des antécédents iconiques [13].

En nous limitant à ces quelques arguments, nous comprenons rapidement que la question posée dans le titre de cet article est tout à fait justifiée. Évidemment, la réponse est complexe, car le sujet a été abordé par plusieurs disciplines, avec des méthodologies spécifiques, et les résultats des recherches sont non seulement contradictoires, mais aussi loin d'être définitifs.

Malgré les nombreux passages bibliques qui interdisent la représentation du dieu d'Israël et les diverses opinions sur ce sujet, il me semble intéressant de dégager la manière dont s'y pose la question et d'analyser la dimension référentielle des expressions qui soutiendraient l'existence d'une statue de YHWH dans le temple de Jérusalem à l'époque monarchique. Pour une présentation concise, je me limiterai à l'analyse du deuxième commandement du Décalogue, en partant de l'hypothèse proposée par le

professeur Thomas Römer dans son article intitulé « Le dossier biblique sur la statue de YHWH dans le premier temple de Jérusalem : enquêtes scripturaires à travers la Bible hébraïque » (cf. Römer 2009, 321-42) [14]. Le choix de cet exemple est également motivé par l'utilisation de ce commandement lors de la crise iconoclaste de la période byzantine, lorsque la vénération des icônes fut interprétée comme un acte idolâtre.

Traces scripturaires d'un culte polythéiste

Avant d'entamer l'analyse proprement dite du commandement du Décalogue, il est important de noter que la Bible contient des indices suggérant que YHWH aurait été vénéré en Israël et en Juda à l'époque prémonarchique à côté d'autres divinités. Par exemple, dans sa forme primitive, Dt 32,8-9 affirmait que *ʿelyôn* (עֶלְיוֹן) a attribué le peuple d'Israël à YHWH, considéré comme un des fils de *ʾēl* (אֵל) :

> Quand le *Très-Haut* (עֶלְיוֹן) donna un héritage aux nations, quand il sépara les *fils d'Adam* (בְּנֵי אָדָם), il fixa les limites des peuples selon le nombre des *fils d'Israël* (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). Car la part de *YHWH* (יהוה) [c'est] son peuple, Jacob, la propriété de son héritage. (Dt 32,8-9)

Au lieu de « fils d'Israël » (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) du Texte Massorétique (TM), la Septante (LXX) utilise « anges de Dieu » (*ἀγγέλων θεοῦ*) [15]. Quelques manuscrits grecs proposent cependant une variante : « fils de Dieu » (*υἱῶν θεοῦ*) [16], ce qui supposerait la traduction d'un texte hébraïque contenant « fils de *ʾēl* » (בְּנֵי אֵל) ou « fils d'Elohim » (בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים), comme dans Gn 6,2 [17]. Cette hypothèse est soutenue par deux fragments de Qumrân : l'un avec בני אלוהים [4 QDeut^{j} (4Q37) XII 12-14] [18], et l'autre avec כל אלהים [4QDeut^{q} (4Q44) ligne 8], permettant une éventuelle reconstruction [19]. Le TM semble ici transmettre un *tiqqûné sophérîm* (תיקוני סופרים) [20], c'est-à-dire une correction effectuée par les scribes pour éliminer une lecture potentiellement scandaleuse ou hérétique du texte sacré.

Pour situer cette rectification dans l'histoire, Dominique Barthélemy, en 1962, établissait un parallèle avec les 70 dieux, fils d'Ashéra, du panthéon ougaritique, chacun ayant un peuple comme part d'héritage [21]. Barthélemy affirmait que בני אלוהים avait pu être modifié en בני ישראל pour justifier le nombre de 70 peuples dans lesquels Dieu divisa l'humanité après le Déluge (cf. Gn 10) [22] ou le nombre de 70 âmes des fils d'Israël descendus en Égypte (cf. Dt 10,22) [23]. La variante majoritaire des manuscrits de la

LXX, « anges de Dieu » (*ἀγγέλων θεοῦ*), correspond également à une tradition juive et servira de base aux explications patristiques sur les « anges des nations » [24].

Cet exemple, considéré comme un *tiqqûné sophérîm*, montre que les sources du texte biblique peuvent parfois rappeler l'existence du polythéisme en Israël et que les avertissements contre d'autres divinités ont été progressivement éliminés. Après l'article de Dominique Barthélemy, il a été admis que le texte ancien est celui attesté à Qumrân, qui servit probablement de modèle (*Vorlage*) pour les traducteurs de la LXX. La transition d'un texte à influences polythéistes vers le texte monothéiste du TM est donc motivée théologiquement [25].

Après cet exemple, qui montre la fragilité et la vulnérabilité des arguments du monothéisme traditionnel, passons maintenant à l'étude du deuxième commandement du Décalogue qui, selon le professeur Thomas Römer, aurait dans sa première rédaction justifié l'existence d'une statue de YHWH dans le temple de Jérusalem.

Interdiction des statues des divinités païennes dans le temple de Jérusalem

Les Dix Commandements, transmis dans les livres de l'Exode et du Deutéronome, commencent par cette interdiction formulée en trois versets :

(TM) Ex 20,3 / Dt 5,7 :
לֹא יִהְיֶה־לְּךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנָי׃
« Tu n'auras pas d'autres dieux *devant ma face* ! »

(LXX) Ex 20,3 :
οὐκ ἔσονταί σοι θεοὶ ἕτεροι *πλὴν ἐμοῦ*.
« Tu n'auras pas d'autres dieux *en dehors de moi*. »

(LXX) Dt 5,7 :
οὐκ ἔσονταί σοι θεοὶ ἕτεροι *πρὸ προσώπου μου*.
« Tu n'auras pas d'autres dieux *devant ma face*. »

(TM) Ex 20,4 :
לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְּךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ׃
« Tu ne te feras pas de *figure taillée et aucune forme* qui est dans les cieux en haut, et qui est sur la terre en bas, et qui est dans les eaux sous la terre ! »

(TM) Dt 5,8 :
לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל כָּל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ׃
« Tu ne te feras pas de *figure taillée, aucune forme* qui est dans les cieux en haut, et qui est sur la terre en bas, et qui est dans les eaux sous la terre ! »

(LXX) Ex 20,4 / Dt 5,8 :
οὐ ποιήσεις σεαυτῷ *εἴδωλον* οὐδὲ παντὸς *ὁμοίωμα* ὅσα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἄνω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ γῇ κάτω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τοῖς ὕδασιν ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς.
« Tu ne te feras pas d'*idole* ni aucune *ressemblance* de ce qui est dans le ciel en haut et de ce qui est sur la terre en bas et de ce qui est dans les eaux sous la terre. »

(TM) Ex 20,5 / Dt 5,9 :
לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תָעָבְדֵם כִּי אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא ...
« *Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant elles et tu ne les serviras*, car moi, YHWH, ton Dieu, suis un Dieu jaloux… »

(LXX) Ex 20,5 / Dt 5,9 :
οὐ προσκυνήσεις αὐτοῖς οὐδὲ μὴ λατρεύσῃς αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι κύριος ὁ θεός σου, θεὸς ζηλωτὴς...
« *Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant eux, tu ne leur rendras pas un culte*, car moi je suis le Seigneur, ton Dieu, un Dieu zélé… » [26]

En s'appuyant sur les differences textuelles entre le TM et la LXX [27], Thomas Römer considère que l'interdiction de représenter YHWH a été formulée en deux ou trois étapes successives. Initialement, elle concernait seulement la présence d'autres divinités dans le sanctuaire de YHWH, placées devant sa statue, ce qui impliquait qu'elles étaient considérées comme ses égales en rang [28]. Ce sens initial de l'interdiction, datant probablement de la réforme du roi Josias (entre 628 et 622 av. J.C.) [29], peut être observé si on lit les versets 5 et 9 (Ex 20,5 et Dt 5,9) immédiatement après les versets 3 et 7 (Ex 20,3 et Dt 5,7) :

3/7 : « Tu n'auras pas d'autres dieux *devant ma face* ! »

5/9 : « *Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant eux et tu ne les serviras*, car moi, YHWH, ton Dieu, suis un Dieu jaloux... »

Lorsque le temple de Jérusalem fut reconstruit (en 515 av. J.C.) après l'exil babylonien, le verset 4, respectivement 8 (Ex 20,4 et Dt 5,8), fut introduit dans le texte, interdisant désormais la fabrication d'une (nouvelle) statue de YHWH : « Tu ne te feras pas de *figure taillée* (פֶּסֶל) et/, aucune *forme* (תְּמוּנָה). » Plusieurs arguments peuvent être avancés en faveur de cette hypothèse, à partir de l'analyse des deux termes du TM et leur traductions respectives dans la LXX.

פֶּסֶל et *εἴδωλον*

Le mot פֶּסֶל, qui n'a pas d'équivalent en sémitique oriental (langue parlée en Babylonie et en Assyrie antiques, incluant l'akkadien), désigne dans l'AT une figure taillée en bois, pierre ou métal d'une divinité [30]. Ce sens apparaît dans les constructions génitives où le substantif פֶּסֶל figure au singulier et au pluriel, principalement comme *nomen regens* : פֶּסֶל הָאֲשֵׁרָה (« la figure d'Ashéra », 2 R 21,7), פֶּסֶל הַתַּמֻּל (« la figure de la divinité », 2 Ch 33,7), פֶּסֶל הָאֵפוֹד (« la figure de l'éphod », Jg 18,18), פֶּסֶל מִיכָה (« la figure de [taillée par] Mica », Jg 18,31), פְּסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם (« les figures de leurs dieux », Dt 7,25 ; 12,3 ; Es 21,9), פְּסִילֵי בָבֶל (« les figures de Babylone », Jr 51,47), פְּסִילֵי כַסְפֵּךְ (« les figures de ton argent », Es 30,22), ou comme *nomen rectum* : עֹבְדֵי פֶּסֶל (« les serviteurs de la figure [taillée] », Ps 97,7 TM) et אֶרֶץ פְּסִלִים (« le pays des figures [taillées] », Jr 50,38) [31].

Dans certains versets, פֶּסֶל est associé à מַסֵּכָה (« métal fondu ») [32]. Par exemple, la première des douze malédictions proclamées par les Lévites aux hommes d'Israël déclare : « Maudit l'homme qui fera une *figure taillée ou de métal fondue* (פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה) – une abomination pour le Seigneur, œuvre des mains d'un artisan – et la placera en cachette » (Dt 27,15). Dans ce contexte, פֶּסֶל et מַסֵּכָה jouent un rôle descriptif : ils indiquent le processus de fabrication, par taille ou fonte, du matériau destiné à représenter des divinités rivales de YHWH [33].

On pourrait donc envisager de traduire פֶּסֶל par « statue », du moins en 2 R 21,7 (cf. 2 Ch 33,7), où il est dit que le roi Manassé plaça une פֶּסֶל הָאֲשֵׁרָה dans le temple de Jérusalem [34]. Le même sens s'applique probablement en Jg 18, mais en référence à une éventuelle statue de YHWH, car il s'agit d'un פֶּסֶל fabriqué par un membre de la tribu de Dan et confié à un prêtre lévite descendant de Moïse (cf. Jg 18,14.17.18.20.30.31) [35]. Dans tous ces exemples, la TOB préfère traduire פֶּסֶל par « idole » [36], un terme grec qui reflète, comme nous le verrons, une polémique contre le monde païen, tel qu'il fut employé dans la LXX [37].

En effet, dans le Pentateuque, la LXX traduit פֶּסֶל par la forme correspondante de *γλυπτόν* (« figure taillée, image sculptée, statue » [38]), sauf dans les deux versions du Décalogue, où elle utilise *εἴδωλον* [39]. Au total, *εἴδωλον* apparaît 90 fois dans la LXX – y compris dans les livres propres à la LXX –, dont 12 fois dans le Pentateuque [40], où il traduit principalement des termes hébraïques désignant des divinités étrangères et leurs représentations (cf. Lv 19,4 ; 26,30 ; Nb 25,22 ; 33,52 ; Dt 29,16 ; 32,21) [41], à l'exception de תְּרָפִים en Genèse (cf. Gn 31,19.34.35) [42].

Dans le monde gréco-romain, c'était le mot *ἄγαλμα* qui désignait la statue ou la représentation cultuelle d'une divinité [43]. D'ailleurs, le pluriel *ἀγάλματα* apparaît dans deux passages d'Isaïe, dont une fois comme équivalent de פָּסִיל (cf. Es 21,9) [44]. Selon la plupart des commentateurs, l'emploi de *εἴδωλον* dans le deuxième commandement du Décalogue indique que l'interdiction ne visait plus seulement la proscription de la fabrication et/ou de l'adoration des représentations possibles de YHWH, dans ou hors du culte, mais une condamnation généralisée et irréfutable de la foi dans les diverses divinités de la mythologie grecque et de leurs formes de représentation [45]. La qualité essentielle du substantif *εἴδωλον*, tel qu'il est utilisé ici, était sa connotation péjorative : il désignait « la forme sans consistance avec laquelle la folie de certains hommes prétendait remplacer le vrai Dieu » (Büchsel 1967, 131). En tout cas, en dehors du Décaloque, l'utilisation de *εἴδωλον* dans la LXX nécessite une analyse détaillée de chaque occurrence pour en déterminer le sens [46].

תְּמוּנָה et *ὁμοίωμα*

Revenons maintenant au TM du Décalogue : comme la simple interdiction de fabriquer un פֶּסֶל semblait insuffisante, le même verset a été élargi par la précision suivante : « aucune תְּמוּנָה qui est dans les cieux en haut, et qui est sur la terre en bas, et qui est dans les eaux sous la terre ! ». L' étymologie du mot תְּמוּנָה est incertaine. La seule chose dont nous pouvons être sûrs est son lien étymologique avec מִין, « genre », « forme » [47]. Sur les huit occurrences dans le Pentateuque, dans cinq d'entre elles תְּמוּנָה est associé à פֶּסֶל et désigne des représentations avec des traits humains, animaux, végétaux ou astraux [48].

Cependant, lorsque תְּמוּנָה désigne l'apparence concrète de YHWH dans une théophanie, il semble se référer plutôt à son « visage » : « Avec lui, je parle bouche à bouche, en vision et non en énigmes, et il regarde le *visage de YHWH* (תְּמֻנַת יְהוָה) » (Nb 12,8). Mais c'est dans le Ps 17TM,15 que nous percevons mieux cette dimension

plastique et cultuelle du substantif : « Moi, dans la justice, je contemplerai *ta face* [פָּנֶיךָ], je me rassasierai, à mon réveil, de *ton visage* (תְּמוּנָתֶךָ) » [49].

Lu en relation avec ces deux derniers exemples, תְּמוּנָה dans le commandement du Décalogue semble confirmer la cible précise de l'interdiction : la statue de YHWH et les différentes manières dont cette représentation pouvait être matérialisée. Sans cette précision, il serait difficile de comprendre l'avertissement de Dt 4,15-20 : « Prenez bien garde à vous-mêmes : vous n'avez vu *aucune forme* (כָּל־ תְּמוּנָה) le jour où YHWH vous a parlé à l'Horeb du milieu du feu ».

Dans le contexte de l'interdiction des représentations cultuelles dans le Pentateuque, la LXX traduit toujours תְּמוּנָה avec *ὁμοίωμα* (cf. Ex 20,4 ; Dt 4,12.15.16.23.25 ; 5,8), un mot qui, en grec classique, exprime la « ressemblance », la « similitude », la « copie » [50]. Comme son équivalent hébraïque, *ὁμοίωμα* acquiert ici un sens nouveau car il exprime désormais une relation concrète entre la « copie » et l'« original » [51]. Dans les trois autres occurrences de תְּמוּנָה, probablement par scrupule théologique, les traducteurs ont atténué le texte pour éviter de suggérer que l'homme pourrait voir Dieu « face à face » [52].

Notons également qu'en Dt 5,8, תְּמוּנָה est en relation de juxtaposition et peut donc être compris comme une apposition interprétative de פֶּסֶל (« Tu ne te feras pas de *figure taillée*, [c'est-à-dire, en d'autres termes] aucune *forme* »), tandis qu'en Ex 20,4, en raison de l'utilisation de la copule (« Tu ne te feras pas de *figure taillée et* aucune *forme* »), il peut être considéré séparément de פֶּסֶל et se référer à un objet distinct [53].

Ces possibilités de considérer פֶּסֶל et תְּמוּנָה en relation de coordination ou d'apposition peuvent également soutenir la rédaction du commandement en deux ou trois phases successives. Les suffixes pluriels des versets 5 et 9 : « Tu ne te prosterneras pas devant *eux/elles* et tu ne *les* serviras, car moi, YHWH, ton Dieu, suis un Dieu jaloux » (Ex 20,5 et Dt 5,9), peuvent se référer, en Dt 5, uniquement au pluriel אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (« autres dieux ») du verset 7, tandis qu'en Ex 20, ils peuvent être mis en relation également avec פֶּסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה (« *figure taillée* et aucune *forme* ») du verset 4, lorsqu'on considère deux objects distincts représentant des divinités.

Quant aux termes utilisés dans la LXX, d'une part, ils suggèrent une évolution sémantique de l'interdiction des représentations iconiques en Israël, et d'autre part, ils trahissent une préoccupation (théologique) de distinguer aux yeux des contemporains YHWH des divinités du panthéon grec.

En résumé, nous pourrions dire qu'à l'origine le commandement « Tu n'auras pas d'autres dieux *devant ma face* » devait être compris comme une interdiction de placer des statues d'autres divinités dans le temple de YHWH à Jérusalem, face à la statue de celui-ci. Ce désir d'imposer la suprématie de YHWH et l'exclusivité de son culte trouve sans doute son origine dans la réforme cultique du roi Josias, vers la fin du VII[e] siècle. Dans ce contexte, 2 R 23 relate la destruction de la statue « d'Ashéra de la maison de YHWH » (v. 6), la démolition des « maisons des prostitués sacrés qui étaient dans la maison de YHWH où les femmes tissaient des habilles pour Ashéra » (v. 7), et la suppression des « chevaux que les rois d'Israël avaient donnés pour le soleil à l'entrée de la maison de YHWH » (v. 11). Un siècle plus tard, au début de l'ère perse, la disposition fut radicalisée par l'inclusion de la prohibition de représenter YHWH lui-même, ainsi que d'autres divinités sous quelque forme que ce soit [54]. Au III[e] siècle av. J.C., avec la traduction du Pentateuque en grec, le commandement fut interprété comme une condamnation des cultes et des pratiques idôlatres des peuples parmi lesquels vivaient les Juifs à cette époque. La LXX préfère les termes *εἴδωλον* et *ὁμοίωμα* pour souligner l'aversion envers les représentations des dieux des payans et l'aspect illusoire de l'adoration qui leur était rendue par rapport au Dieu d'Israël [55].

Quand Israël est-il devenu aniconique ?

La destruction de Jérusalem (en 587 av. J.C.) et l'exil babylonien (597-538 av. J.C.) ne constituèrent pas seulement une catastrophe politique et militaire majeure pour le royaume de Juda, mais aussi un profond bouleversement de la foi et de la pratique religieuse du peuple juif. Le temple et la statue de YHWH n'avaient pas survécu à l'agression. Cette tragédie marqua non seulement la fin d'un symbole religieux, mais aussi la fin de la résidence terrestre de YHWH [56]. Juda fut alors contraint de réévaluer sa foi concernant la présence de YHWH au milieu du peuple et, par conséquent, de l'adapter à la nouvelle réalité sociopolitique.

Avec le retour de l'exil, des discussions persistèrent sur l'opportunité de reconstruire une statue de YHWH dans le cadre de la restauration du temple et de la réorganisation du culte [57]. Toutefois, bien qu'en 515 av. J-C. le temple fût rebati et le culte repris comme auparavant, l'exil avait aussi amené la fondation d'un autre lieu de rassemblement des fidèles : la synagogue. Sans considérer la synagogue comme un substitut de temple, elle orienta inconstablement et progressivement le culte dans une autre direction. Puis, sous l'impulsion des divers courants philosophiques et religieux du bassin méditerranéen [58],

l'élite intellectuelle du judaïsme naissant opta également pour un aniconisme radical, inhabituel pour la mentalité de l'époque [59]. La rupture avec l'époque préexilique ne fut pas seulement marquée par l'interdiction de toute representation de YHWH, mais aussi par la disparition de l'arche d'alliance :

> Et lorsque vous vous multiplierez et que vous deviendrez féconds dans le pays, en ces jours-là – oracle de YHWH –, on ne dira plus : "L'arche de l'alliance de YHWH !", et il ne viendra plus au cœur, et on ne s'en souviendra plus, et on ne remarquera plus son absence, et il ne s'en fera plus (Jr 3,16-17).

Cette prophétie annonce le remplacement de l'arche de l'alliance, en tant que trône de YHWH, par la ville de Jérusalem, qui devient ainsi le « trône » par excellence du Dieu d'Israël. Évidemment, l'absence de royauté et, par conséquent, des moyens de médiation de l'image de la divinité, ainsi que l'idée d'un Dieu unique, transcendant et invisible, facilitèrent finalement la transition vers une religion aniconique. C'est dans ce contexte d'après l'exil qu'il convient également de situer la mise par écrit d'une série de compositions juives de l'époque hellénistique transmises dans la LXX et soulignant la toute-puissance de YHWH, au détriment des autres dieux, réduits à de simples objets matériels, des représentations inanimés et impuissantes [60].

Cependant, cette transition fut graduelle : après l'interdiction des représentations iconiques et la disparition définitive de l'arche de l'alliance, certaines substitutions furent introduites, comme le chandelier à sept branches (cf. Sir 26,17 ; 1 M 4,50 ; 2 M 1,8 ; 10,3). Avec la perte de ce dernier, après la destruction de Jérusalem en 70 ap. J.C., la substitution la plus importante fut le rouleau de la *Torah* qui rendit « visible la parole de Dieu, désormais invisible » (Römer 2009, 338-9). En résumé, la lecture et l'étude de la Torah (ou Pentateuque) remplacèrent finalement le culte iconique sous ses divers aspects. Cependant, ni le commandement du Décalogue ni les substitutions successives n'exclurent l'utilisation de la sculpture et de la peinture décoratives, comme en témoignent les fresques et mosaïques des synagogues de Beth Alpha en Galilée, Gerasa/Jerash en Jordanie, Na'arah près de Jéricho et Doura Europos en Syrie, ainsi que les figures humaines et animales ornant les tombes juives de Rome [61]. Au II^{e} siècle ap. J.C., les rabbins interdisaient encore diverses représentations (cf. *Mekhilta Exode* 20,4) (cf. Costa, 2010, 283-316), mais au IV^{e} siècle, elles étaient finalement acceptées comme ornements, mais non comme objets de culte (cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Lévitique 26, 1) [62].

Notes

[1] Je renvoie à la définition donnée par Ioan Chirilă de ce terme : « le mot aniconisme provient du grec eikon (*image, figure*) et se forme par l'ajout du préfixe négatif an– et du suffixe –isme. Il est utilisé pour indiquer, ou plus précisément pour affirmer, l'absence de représentations artistiques visuelles d'une divinité dans le cadre d'un système religieux. En d'autres termes, l'aniconisme est une caractéristique fondamentale des religions dans lesquelles les divinités ne sont pas représentées de manière iconique, ni sous forme anthropomorphique, ni sous forme zoomorphique. De ce fait, dans le culte des religions concernées, on ne trouvera pas d'iconisations d'un dieu qui auraient la qualité de symbole cultuel central ou dominant. » (Chirilă 2017, 45).

[2] Le titre de « Décalogue » couramment donné aux dix commandements (en grec *δεκάλογος*, formé de *δέκα*, « dix » et *λόγος*, « parole ») ne se trouve qu'en Ex 34,28 et Dt 4,13 ; 10,4 (TM : עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים ; LXX : *δέκα λόγους*). Le récit de la transmission du « Décalogue » ne précise pas le nombre de commandements que YHWH a écrits sur les deux tables de la Loi et transmis par Moïse à son peuple.

[3] TOB.

[4] TOB.

[5] TOB.

[6] La vision de Dieu reste un privilège accordé à un très petit nombre de personnes dans l'AT : Gn 18,1 ; 26,2 ; Ex 24,11 ; 33,11 ; Nb 12,8 ; Dt 34,10 ; Jg 13,22 ; Es 6,5 ; Ez 1,28 ; Am 9,1.

[7] Selon la LXX, Agar affirme avoir vu Dieu : « En face j'ai vu (celui) qui s'est fait voir de moi » (*ἐνώπιον εἶδον ὀφθέντα μοι*) » (Gn 16,13). Dans le TM, la déclaration prend une forme interrogative et a un sens différent : « Ai-je vraiment vu ici celui qui me voit après avoir vu [son] dos (הֲגַם הֲלֹם רָאִיתִי אַחֲרֵי רֹאִי) ? ». Comme la question d'Agar omet le complément du verbe « voir », on peut supposer que le texte original disait « celui qui m'a vue ». Selon cette correction, il est possible de comprendre qu'Agar a vu YHWH « face à face ». L'apparat critique de la BHS propose de lire « Dieu [je l'ai vu] (אֱלֹהִים [רָאִיתִי]) » à la place de l'adverbe « ici (הֲלֹם) » et d'ajouter juste après « et je vis (וָאֶחְיֶ) », en base au principe biblique qu'il n'est pas possible de voir Dieu sans mourir (cf. Ex 33,20).

[8] Une série de psaumes dépeignent YHWH comme un véritable dieu des tempêtes, à l'image de Baal-Hadad (cf. Ps 17TM[16LXX],8-16 ; 29[28LXX],3-9 ; 65[64LXX],10-14 ; 77[76 LXX],17-20 ; 97[96LXX],2-5). Dès le IX^e^ siècle av. J.C. en Israël, et vers la fin du VIII^e^ siècle av. J.C. en Juda, les symboles solaires du dieu phénicien Baal-Shamen furent même adoptés, comme en témoigne l'iconographie, pour faire de YHWH à son tour un « Maître du ciel » (cf. Os 6,3.5 ; So 3,5 ; Ps 43[42LXX],3 ; 84[83LXX],12).

[9] Le nom Béthel (בֵּית־אֵל, « maison de *ʾēl* ») suggère un sanctuaire initialement dédié au dieu El. En Nb 23,22 et 24,8, le Dieu qui a fait sortir les Israélites d'Égypte est d'ailleurs appelé *ʾēl* et comparé à un taureau : « *ʾēl* les a fait sortir d'Égypte, sa force est comme celle d'un taureau (אֵל מוֹצִיאָם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעֲפֹת רְאֵם לוֹ) ».

[10] Selon Gn 1,26-27 et Ez 1,26-28, le corps de Dieu a une forme humaine.

[11] Le mot « Ashéra » (אֲשֵׁרָה), dans ses 40 occurrences dans le TM, est utilisé pour désigner soit le nom propre de la déesse (cf. Jg 3,7 ; 1 R 15,13 ; 18,19 ; 2 R 21,7 etc.), soit un objet cultuel qui lui est associé. Cet objet n'est jamais décrit précisément, mais on peut l'imaginer comme une sorte de poteau carré en bois (cf. Jg 6,26) qui pouvait être planté (cf. Dt 16,21), brûlé (cf. Dt 12,3) ou abattu (cf. Dt 7,5).

[12] On pourrait ajouter que certains psaumes évoquent une procession (cf. Ps 24TM[23LXX],7-10 ; 68TM[67LXX],25-26) impliquant la présence d'une statue de YHWH. Dans une excellente étude de la formule יְהוָה מָלָךְ, attestée dans les Ps 93TM[92LXX],1 ; 96TM[95LXX],1 (= 1 Ch 16,23) ; 97TM[96LXX],1 ; 99TM[98LXX],1, ainsi que sur ses parallèles bibliques et extra-bibliques, Edward Lipinski a conclu qu'elle renvoyait à une proclamation faite lors d'une procession de « l'arche de Yahwé-roi ». Cependant, dans la note, l'auteur s'interroge : « Mais quel autre objet cultuel pouvait symboliser dans le cortège la présence divine ? Il semble, d'après II Chron. 35, 4, que c'est la réforme de Josias qui mit fin aux processions de l'arche. » (Lipinski 1965, 437, n. 1).

[13] Il ne faut pas ignorer le fait qu'« une divinité sans moyens de présence, de médiation ou de représentation matérielle sur terre, et sans cadres philosophiques soutenus par des institutions sociales puissantes, aurait eu une valeur ou une utilité réduite » (McClellan 2022, 106).

[14] En particulier « Premier indice : l'interdiction d'images dans le Décalogue », pp. 326-28.

[15] LXX : « Lorsque le *Très-Haut* (*ὁ ὕψιστος*) partagea les nations, comme il dispersa les *fils d'Adam* (*υἱοὺς Αδαμ*), il fixa les frontières des nations selon le nombre des *anges de Dieu* (*ἀγγέλων θεοῦ*). Et la part du *Seigneur* (*κυρίου*) fut son peuple, Jacob, la portion de son héritage, Israël. » (Dt 32,8-9).

[16] Selon l'édition critique de Wevers, la variante υἱῶν est attestée par « 848 106c *Iust Dial* CXXXI 1 (1°) *Or* VI 60 *Arm Barh* 24 : 6 ». Malheureusement, le manuscrit 848 est corrompu après υἱῶν, seul le texte arménien confirme l'intégralité de la lecture *υἱῶν θεοῦ* (cf. Wevers 1978, 85).

[17] L'expression בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים du TM est traduite dans la LXX par *οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ* en Jb 1,6 ; 2,1 ; 38,7.

[18] Il est probable que בני אלוהים en 4QDeut^{j} provienne d'une forme antérieure בני אל. Cette hypothèse rendrait la correction du TM plus explicable, avec l'ajout des

seules lettres ישר avant אל. Cette leçon pourrait être soutenue par le texte fragmentaire 1QHa 24 : 33-34 (מבני אל שו[מעי ... מג]בולות עמים), qui fait clairement référence à ce verset (cf. Skehan 1954, 12-15 ; *id.* 1959, 21-25).

[19] En Dt 32,43, la LXX présente un verset absent du TM : *προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ* (« que se prosternent devant lui tous les fils de Dieu ! »). Le manuscrit 4QDeut^{q} (ligne 7) porte quant à lui : והשתחוו לו כל אלהים (« Et se prosternent devant lui tous les dieux ! »).

[20] Bien que ces derniers soient plus nombreux, selon les listes rabbiniques, le TM comporterait 18 *tiqquné sophérîm* : Gn 18,22 ; Nb 11,15 ; 12,12 ; 1 S 3,13 ; 2 S 16,12 ; 20,1 ; 1 R 12,16 ; Jr 2,11 ; Ez 8,17 ; Os 4,7 ; Ha 1,12 ; Za 2,12 ; Ml 1,13 ; Jb 7,20 ; 32,3 ; Ps 106TM,20 ; Lm 3,20 ; 2 Ch 10,16 (voir Barthélemy 1963, 285-304).

[21] Dans les textes ougaritiques, אִל désigne le taureau considéré comme le « père des dieux », tandis que son épouse Ashéra aurait engendré 70 fils, formant ainsi un panthéon.

[22] La version grecque de ce chapitre mentionne 72 noms au lieu des 70 du TM.

[23] Toutefois, ici, la LXX conserve le même nombre que le TM. Cette mention des « fils d'Israël » est expliquée par Rachi de la manière suivante : « En raison des 70 âmes des fils d'Israël descendus en Égypte, Dieu, en tant que souverain des nations, a établi le nombre de 70 langues. » (cité dans Barthélemy 1963, 297).

[24] Pour Barthélemy, la lecture majoritaire de la LXX correspond à celle du Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, où les versets 8-9 sont traduits ainsi : « Lorsque le Très-Haut donna le monde en héritage aux peuples issus des fils de Noé, lorsqu'il sépara les écritures et les langues des fils d'homme à l'époque de la division, en ce même moment il jeta le sort avec *70 anges princes des peuples* [שׁובעין מלאכיא רברבי עממין] en compagnie desquels il était descendu pour voir la ville, et en ce moment, il fixa les frontières des peuples selon l'évolution du nombre des 70 âmes d'Israël qui descendirent en Égypte. » (Traduit dans Barthélemy 1963, 298). Le Targum s'appuie clairement sur la leçon « anges de Dieu » de la LXX, mais y ajoute une variante inédite : « anges princes des nations ».

[25] Dt 4,19, selon lequel « le soleil, la lune, les étoiles et toute l'armée des cieux » constituent la part attribuée par YHWH aux nations – tout en demeurant sous son autorité (voir Himbaza 2002, 527-48).

[26] On trouve également ailleurs la caractérisation de YHWH comme un אֵל קַנָּא (« *ʾēl* jaloux ») concernant l'interdiction du culte des autres dieux (cf. Ex 34,14 ; Dt 4,24 ; 6,15). La LXX le traduit toujours dans le Pentateuque par l'adjectif *ζηλωτής* qui, en grec classique et *koinè*, signifiait « (adepte) zélé » ou « (admirateur) convaincu », c'est-à-dire une personne animée par un désir ardent pour quelque chose.

[27] Le Décalogue apparaît dans le TM de manière presque identique en Ex 20,2-17 et Dt 5,6-22. Par rapport à la formulation du Deutéronome, la particularité la

plus originale de la version de l'Exode réside dans la justification donnée pour l'observance du Sabbat : dans Ex 20,11, Dieu cesse tout travail le septième jour de la création (cf. Gn 2,2-3), tandis que dans Dt 5,14-15, il est fait référence à la libération de l'esclavage en Égypte (cf. Ex 14). D'autres différences ne se trouvent que dans la LXX où l'ordre des trois commandements négatifs (6, 7, 8) du TM est modifié : 7, 8, 6 (cf. Ex 20) et 7, 6, 8 (cf. Dt 5).

[28] Dans l'Antiquité, une statue cultuelle était bien plus qu'un symbole ou une simple représentation : elle constituait la manifestation matérielle d'une présence divine. Par conséquent, on lui présentait des sacrifices et on brûlait de l'encens (cf. Os 4,13), on lui offrait des gâteaux et des libations (cf. Jr 7,18), on dressait des tables en son honneur (cf. Es 65,11 ; LtJr 26). Les fidèles embrassaient ces statues (cf. Os 13,2 ; 1 R 19,18), tendaient les mains vers elles (cf. Ps 44TM[43LXX],21), les portaient en procession (cf. Es 46,7 ; Jr 10,5), fléchissaient les genoux et se prosternaient devant elles (cf. 1 R 19,18). Ils dansaient et criaient, se faisant des incisions autour de leurs autels (cf. 1 R 18,26-28). Le culte des statues s'accompagnait souvent de pratiques de prostitution sacrée (cf. Os 4,14.18 ; Dt 23,18-19) (voir Guichard 2019, 12-4).

[29] L'abandon de la représentation iconique de YHWH est particulièrement corrélé à la réforme religieuse du roi Josias (640-609 av. J.C.) en 622 av. J.C., lorsqu'une vaste campagne d'élimination des cultes étrangers fut menée en Juda. Le livre de 2 R 23 rapporte le retrait du temple des prêtres servant les cultes astraux (v. 5), de la statue d'Ashéra (v. 6), des prostituées sacrées et de leur atelier de tissage (v. 7), les chars et les chevaux consacrés à Shémesh (v. 11), ainsi que des autels où étaient célébrés les cultes astraux (v. 12). Comme on peut le constater, plusieurs de ces mesures concernent le culte astral qui était alors en vogue chez les Assyriens. Josias a probablement profité du déclin de l'Empire assyrien pour réorganiser son royaume. Cette réforme fut soutenue idéologiquement par une première rédaction du Deutéronome, qui affirme en Dt 6,4 : « YHWH, notre Dieu, YHWH est un (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד) », ce qui signifie « non pas YHWH est le seul dieu, mais YHWH est un, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne se manifeste désormais plus à Samarie, Teman, Hébron ou ailleurs, mais exclusivement à Jérusalem, et qu'il exige de ses fidèles une loyauté absolue. Le corollaire de cette confession est évidemment l'existence d'un seul lieu de culte légitime – Jérusalem (Dt 12,13-27). Cette réforme de centralisation cultuelle *mono-yahwiste* n'a certainement pas eu un succès immédiat. » (comme le note Lepesqueux 2020, 55-56).

[30] Dans le texte hébraïque, la racine פסל apparaît 60 fois, que ce soit sous forme verbale ou nominale. La forme verbale au qal se rencontre 6 fois (cf. Ex 34,1.4 ; Dt 10,1.3 ; 1 R 5,32 ; Ha 2,18). Les formes nominales se répartissent entre le singulier פֶּסֶל (31 occurrences) et le pluriel פְּסִיל (23 occurrences), comme en témoignent

les références suivantes : Ex 20,4 ; Lv 26,1 ; Dt 4,16.23.25 ; 5,8 ; 7,5.25 ; 12,3 ; 27,15 ; Jg 3,19.26 ; 17,3.4 ; 18,14.17.18.20.30.31 ; 2 R 17,41 ; 21,7 ; Es 10,10 ; 21,9 ; 30,22 ; 40,19.20 ; 42,8.17 ; 44,9.10.15.17 ; 45,20 ; 48,5 ; Jr 8,19 ; 10,14 ; 50,38 ; 51,17.47.52 ; Os 11,2 ; Mi 1,7 ; 5,12 ; Na 1,14 ; Ha 2,18 ; Ps 78TM,58 ; 97TM,7 ; 2 Ch 33,7.19.22 ; 34,3.4.7. Pour une analyse approfondie, voir Dohmen 2007, 262-72.

[31] Le TM utilise plusieurs termes dépréciatifs pour désigner les divinités étrangères et leurs représentations : גִּלֻּלִים (« choses immondes », employé 46 fois dont 37 en Ézéchiel), אֱלִיל (« néant », attesté au moins 16 fois), עָצָב (« souffrance », utilisé au moins 16 fois), שִׁקּוּץ (« abomination », présent 28 fois) et הֶבֶל (« vanité », attesté au moins 10 fois). Ces expressions reflètent la condamnation radicale de l'idolâtrie dans la tradition biblique, comme l'analyse Tatum 182 ,1986.

[32] Cf. Dt 27,15 ; Jg. 17,3.4 ; 18,14.17.18 ; Es 42,17 ; Na 1,14 ; Ha 2,18.

[33] Il est également possible que l'association de ces deux termes renvoie ici à un seul objet d'abomination (une statue sculptée dans le bois et plaquée de métal) plutôt qu'à deux objets distincts.

[34] Cette représentation iconique d'Ashéra pouvait également prendre la forme d'un pilier en bois ou en pierre. Dans l'autel du temple yahwiste découvert à Arad, dans la région du Néguev, deux stèles ont été retrouvées. Ces pierres présentent des traces de peinture, ce qui pourrait indiquer qu'elles étaient peintes pour représenter les divinités vénérées à travers elles. À moins qu'une stèle n'ait été apportée dans le temple uniquement pour remplacer l'autre, il est probable qu'elles représentaient YHWH et une autre divinité (voir Römer 2014, 163).

[35] Michée, comme l'indique son nom hébraïque מִיכָיְהוּ (« Qui est comme YHWH ? »), était un yahviste, et rien ne suggère que le sanctuaire de Dieu dans sa maison ait été contesté ou considéré comme hérétique (cf. Jg 17,4-13 ; 18,24-30).

[36] En Jg 18,14, nous trouvons l'association פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה (« figure taillée et/ou fondue »), traduite littéralement dans la LXX par *γλυπτὸν καὶ χωνευτόν*. En Jg 18,24 [TM], l'expression « mes dieux » (אֱלֹהַי) est traduite dans la LXX par « ma statue » (*τὸ γλυπτόν μου*). Certains témoins de la tradition textuelle (L, Syr et Lat) portent « mes dieux » (*θεούς μου*), ce qui pourrait correspondre à une variante ancienne de la LXX (référence : Harle 1999, 234, 237).

[37] Par contre, en 2 R 21,7 et en Jg 18,14.18.20.24.30.31 LXX traduit chaque fois פֶּסֶל par *γλυπτόν*.

[38] La LXX rend les formes nominales פֶּסֶל et פְּסִיל principalement par *γλυπτόν* (40 occurrences), mais utilise occasionnellement d'autres équivalents : *ἄγαλμα* (Es 21,9), *γλύμμα* (Es 45,20), *θεός* (Es 44,15), *γλύφω* (Es 44,9-10), *εἴδωλον* (Ez 20,4 ; Dt 5,8 ;

2 Ch 33,22 ; 34,7 ; Es 30,22) et *εἰκών* (Es 40,19-20). Pour la forme verbale פָּסַל, la LXX emploie généralement *λαξεύω*, sauf en 1 R 5,32 (*ἑτοιμάζω*) et Ha 2,18 (*γλύφω*).

[39] Toutefois, en Dt 5,8, le codex *Alexandrinus* et le papyrus Chester Beatty (963) conservent la leçon *γλύπτον*, ce qui correspondrait à la version ancienne de la LXX (voir Wevers 1978, 133).

[40] Cf. Gn 31,19.34.35 ; Ex 20,4 ; Lv 19,4 ; 26,30 ; Nb 25,2[2] ; 33,52 ; Dt 5,8 ; 29,16 ; 32,21.

[41] Le mot *εἴδωλον*, dérivé du verbe *εἴδεσθαι* (« apparaître », « sembler être », « ressembler à », « représenter comme »), désigne une « image », une « apparence » ou une « ressemblance » qu'elle soit produite artificiellement, formée d'elle-même ou simplement existante. Par exemple, *εἴδωλον* peut renvoyer à la « représentation d'un homme » et il évoque alors l'image de la personne sans être la personne elle-même. Selon l'hypothèse avancée pour la première fois par Friedrich Büchsel dans les années 1930, puis reprise par Barnes W. Tatum dans les années 1980, lorsque *εἴδωλον* se référait aux « images des divinités », il ne désignait pas l'objet de culte en lui-même, mais précisait plutôt sa relation avec la divinité. D'après ces deux exégètes, ce n'est que dans la LXX que εἴδωλον devient le terme désignant la divinité elle-même. Cependant, dans un article de 2002, Terry Griffith a rassemblé une série de textes littéraires antiques où *εἴδωλον* désignait clairement une statue divine ou un objet cultuel (cf. Griffith 2002, 95-101). Pour appréhender la complexité de la traduction du lemme *εἴδωλον* dans la LXX, on pourra se référer à Angelini 2021, 219-24.

[42] Nous constatons que Rachel emporte avec elle les *teraphim* (תְּרָפִים), une sorte d'idoles domestiques de dimensions variées, que Laban appelle « mes dieux » [אֱלֹהָי] (cf. Gn 31,19.30-37).

[43] L'objet défini comme *ἄγαλμα* est, d'une certaine manière, le support matériel par lequel s'établit la relation entre les hommes et les dieux, ce qui rend sa présence indispensable dans l'espace sacré : « à la fin du V[e] siècle av. J.C. à Athènes, le terme *ἄγαλμα* s'appliquait aux statues qui représentaient les dieux » (Lanérès 2012, 137).

[44] Es 21,9 : וְכָל־פְּסִילֵי אֱלֹהֶיהָ (litt. : « et toutes les images de ses dieux ») / *καὶ πάντα τὰ ἀγάλματα αὐτῆς* (litt. : « et toutes ses statues »). En Es 19,3, *ἀγάλματα* traduit le terme péjoratif אֱלִילִים (« néants »). Une troisième occurrence se trouve en 2 M 2,2. La TOB traduit cette dernière occurrence de *ἀγάλματα* par « statues ».

[45] L'interdiction biblique concernant l'« idole » (*εἴδωλον*) explique probablement l'usage de ce terme (toujours au pluriel : *εἴδωλα*) pour traduire, dans de nombreux livres de la LXX, des mots hébreux signifiant « souillure », « néant », « dieux », « souffles » ou « vanités » (cf. Tatum 1986, 186).

[46] « En ce qui concerne la notion d'*εἴδωλον*, les preuves analysées suggèrent qu'il n'existait pas une sémantique globale du terme *εἴδωλον* dans tous les livres de la LXX, mais plutôt que les traducteurs étaient conscients des multiples sens et *nuances* de ce mot. Les exemples tirés de l'Exode et du Deutéronome montrent que les traducteurs ont exploité ces connotations différentes en sélectionnant un sens particulier ou un aspect du sens dans des cas spécifiques, en fonction de ce qu'ils estimaient le plus adapté au contexte » (Angelini 2019, 14).

[47] Le mot תְּמוּנָה est absent dans les Prophètes et n'apparaît que huit fois dans le Pentateuque (cf. Ex 20,4 ; Nb 12,8 ; Dt 4,12.15.16.23.25 ; 5,8), étant dans la plupart des cas lié à l'interdiction des représentations iconiques de YHWH. Dans les Écrits, il n'est attesté que deux fois (cf. Ps 17[TM],15 ; Jb 4,16) (cf. Waschke 2009, 1125-8).

[48] La TOB le traduit chaque fois par « forme » (cf. Ex 20,4 ; Dt 4,16.23.25 ; Dt 5,8).

[49] « Mis en parallèle avec la *face* de YHWH, il ne fait aucun doute que תְּמוּנָה désigne ici une représentation divine » (Uehlinger 1997, 146).

[50] C'est avec ce sens que le terme ὁμοίωμα doit être compris dans la majorité de ses 41 occurrences dans la LXX.

[51] Les occurrences en Dt 4,16 (« Ne commettez pas d'iniquité et ne vous faites pas de *figure taillée* [*γλυπτὸν*], *forme* [*ὁμοίωμα*] d'aucune *image* [*εἰκόνα*], *forme* [*ὁμοίωμα*] d'homme ou de femme ») et Isaïe 40,18-19 (« À qui avez-vous assimilé le Seigneur et à quelle *forme* [*ὁμοίωμα*] l'avez-vous assimilé ? Un artisan n'a-t-il pas fait une *image* [*εἰκόνα*] ? Ou un orfèvre, en coulant l'or, ne l'a-t-il pas doré ? A-t-il façonné une *forme* [*ὁμοίωμα*] ? ») montrent clairement que *ὁμοίωμα* renvoyait à une réalité ou une image (*εἰκόνα*) pouvant être reproduit (voir aussi Gn 1,26 : « selon notre image et selon notre ressemblance » [בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ / *κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν*]). En revanche, en grec classique, ὁμοίωμα ne soulignait que la similitude avec l'objet représenté, mettant ainsi en avant la correspondance sans qu'il y ait nécessairement un lien concret entre l'archétype (*εἰκών*) et la copie (*ὁμοίωμα*). Autrement dit, la « ressemblance » ou la « forme » dans ὁμοίωμα pouvait être purement accidentelle, comme dans le cas des choses qui se ressemblent surtout par leur apparence extérieure (cf. Schneider 1973, 536).

[52] Nb 12,8 : *τὴν δόξαν κυρίου εἶδεν* (« il a vu la gloire du Seigneur ») et Ps 16[LXX],15 : *τὴν δόξαν σου* (« ta gloire ») ; l'allusion renvoie ici à Ex 33,22 où la « gloire » (TM = כָּבוֹד ; LXX = *δόξα*) de Dieu se révèle à Moïse de dos. En revanche, en Jb 4,16, la LXX traduit תְּמוּנָה avec *μορφή* (« forme », « aspect », « apparence »). En grec classique, *δόξα* signifie « opinion », « thèse philosophique » ou « renommée », mais Philon d'Alexandrie et les gnostiques grecs l'emploient dans le même sens que l'hébreu כָּבוֹד, désignant « la manifestation de la présence divine ». Cependant, en Os 4,7 ; 9,11 ; 10,5,

aussi bien כָּבוֹד (TM) que *δόξα* (LXX) peuvent se référer à la statue d'une divinité (cf. Os 8,5-6 ; 13,2).

[53] Barnes W. Tatum s'est demandé si, en Ex 20,4, la conjonction copulative וְ (« et ») ne devrait pas être traduite avec une fonction disjonctive (« ou ») – « une image taillée ou aucune forme (פֶּסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה) » – comme en Dt 27,15 : « une image taillée ou une image fondue (פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה) » ?

[54] Malgré le prestige des divinités babyloniennes, une voix prophétique s'est élevée pour affirmer ce qui n'avait jamais été dit avec une telle clarté : « Avant Moi, n'a été façonné aucun dieu et après moi, il n'en sera pas ! Moi, Je suis le YHWH, et en dehors de moi, il n'y a pas de Sauveur ! » (Es 43,10-11 ; déclaration reprise ensuite en Es 44,6.8 ; 45,5.6.8.14.18.21.22 ; 46,9). L' affirmation de l'unicité exclusive de YHWH implique aussi l'universalité de son action créatrice (cf. Es 40,26.28 ; 41,20 ; 42,5 ; 43,1.7.15 ; 45,8.12.18 ; 48,7 ; 54,16). Cette réflexion monothéiste du Deutéro-Isaïe trouvera un écho dans les passages ultérieurs du Deutéronome (cf. Dt 4,35.39 ; 32,39), dans la prière du roi Ézéchias (cf. 2 R 19,15-19) et dans la confession des péchés du livre de Néhémie (Ne 9, particulièrement au v. 6, où l'armée des cieux, qui faisait jusqu'alors partie du monde divin, est réduite au statut de créature) (Lepesqueux 2020, 66-7).

[55] Cependant, tout en niant la divinité des dieux païens, la LXX reconnaît parfois que les démons sont ceux que les peuples servent sous ces titres : « Car tous les dieux des nations sont des *démons* (*δαιμόνια*), mais c'est le Seigneur qui a fait les cieux » (Ps 95[LXX],5).

[56] On croyait généralement que les divinités étaient observables dans leur « habitat » naturel, les cieux, et que les temples servaient de porte vers le ciel. Ce concept était répandu non seulement dans les écrits de l'ancien Proche-Orient, mais aussi dans les textes bibliques : « Que tes yeux soient ouverts sur cette maison jour et nuit, sur le lieu dont tu as dit : "Ici sera mon nom." Écoute la prière que ton serviteur adresse vers ce lieu ! Daigne écouter la supplication que ton serviteur et Israël, ton peuple, adressent vers ce lieu ! Toi, écoute au lieu où tu habites, au ciel ; écoute et pardonne » (1 R 8,29-30) ; « YHWH est dans son saint temple, YHWH a son trône dans les cieux. Ses yeux regardent, ses paupières éprouvent les fils des hommes » (Ps 11TM,4).

[57] L'hypothèse selon laquelle une statue de YHWH aurait pu se trouver dans le temple de Jérusalem avant sa destruction, et qui aurait probablement été emportée à Babylone avec d'autres objets sacrés (cf. 2 R 25,13-17), est parfois soutenue par des déclarations prophétiques de l'époque perse annonçant son retour. Ainsi Es 52,8 affirme : « Tes gardes élèvent la voix, ensemble ils poussent des cris de joie car, les yeux dans les yeux, ils voient quand YHWH revient à Sion ». Selon Thomas Römer « de tels textes peuvent aussi simplement exprimer le souhait que Yhwh sera de nouveau présent en

Judée, mais il n'est pas exclu qu'il existait des voix qui voulaient à nouveau rendre visible cette présence à l'aide d'une image. » (Römer 2007, 57).

[58] Dans la Grèce du VI^e^ siècle av. J.C., Héraclite s'opposa à l'idée de représenter les dieux par des images. De même, Xénophane de Colophon (cité grecque d'Ionie, au nord d'Éphèse ; env. 570-475 av. J.C. ?) est célèbre pour son attitude critique envers l'anthropomorphisme religieux et le polythéisme (cf. Römer 2019, 204).

[59] Silviu Bunta affirme que l'idéologie centrée sur la présence de YHWH dans une statue cultuelle aurait survécu aux événements de 597/585 av. J.C., étant soutenue par certains textes bibliques tels que Ps 115TM,2-8 ; Ez 20,32 ; Es 40,18-19 (= Es 46,5-6) ; 42,8-9 ; Jr 2,26-27 ; 10,14-16 ; (Bunta 2021, 77-86).

[60] Voir surtout les occurrences du mot *εἴδωλον* en Estgr C4,19 ; Tb 14,6 ; 1 M 1,43 ; 3,48 ; 13,47 ; 2 M 12,40 ; 3 M 4,16 ; Sg 14 ; 15,15 ; Sir 30, 19 ; Dn 14,3 ; LtJr 72 (voir Barbu 2016, 23-88).

[61] Lorsque Dieu, après avoir prescrit cette loi dans le Décalogue, ordonne ensuite à Moïse de sculpter ou de modeler les chérubins, les objets sacrés pour la tente de la rencontre et le serpent d'airain, commence une description complexe où l'art figuratif est, pour ainsi dire, libéré de l'idolâtrie. Moïse et les artisans, que le Seigneur remplit de son Esprit de sagesse, œuvrent en collaboration avec ce que Dieu désire et inspire (cf. Ex 31,1-11). De même, dans le temple de Salomon, on accepte la représentation décorative des murs avec des figures sculptées « des chérubins, des palmes et des fleurs entrouvertes » recouvertes d'or (cf. 1 R 6,29.32.35).

[62] « Ne vous fabriquez pas des *néants* (אֱלִילִם), ni des *figure taillée* (פֶּסֶל), et n'érigez pas de stèles ; ne placez pas dans votre pays des pierres ciselées pour vous prosterner devant elles. En revanche, vous pouvez poser un pavement orné de figures et d'images dans les sanctuaires, mais sans vous prosterner devant elles » (McNamara, Maher et Hayward 1994, 203-4).

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The Divine Face as Theopoeia in the Psalter: Insights from the Orthodox Tradition

Abstract

Ever since the launch of the historical-critical approach, academic studies of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament have been dominated by its presupposition that, against the overwhelming witness of early and Orthodox Christian interpretive traditions (as well as early Jewish), in the Scriptures one is given narratives—stories, messages, descriptions, concepts, etc. Nevertheless, the Book of Psalms has consistently frustrated this interpretive instinct fundamental to academic studies. My paper—building on this frustration and drawing on recent proposals to discard historical criticism as a useful approach to the Old Testament—argues that the Psalter on its own is aligned with the aforementioned early and eastern Christian appropriations of it. More specifically, the Psalter puts forth the imagery of the "Face" of God in a de-narrativized fashion, neither as a concept, nor as a description (belonging to a past to be recalled or re-actualized in the act of reading), but as an open and ongoing divine embodiment to be had by the visionary and the hearer-speaker of the scriptural text at once.

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I must open this study[1] with three methodological clarifications. First and foremost, when I refer to the Greek text of the Old Testament, I do not have in mind the text commonly published as "the Septuagint." This is because "the Septuagint" as we know it today is of scholarly provenance and relevance, meant to reconstruct the most probable original text. In contrast, the Greek Old Testament as it has been transmitted

in the Orthodox Church (henceforth LXX) is a text built through tradition or reception and not on any academic considerations. Therefore, the base text of my study is the one I translated into English under the title *The Orthodox Psalter* and it is expressed by three manuscripts: the one printed in 1700 in Snagov by Antim Ivireanul, the Greek manuscript 2132 of the Monastery of Sinai, and the renowned manuscript 43 of the Pantokrator monastery (Bunta 2022a)[2]. Although these come from different locations and times, they contain very few divergent readings, a fact that attests to the stability of their shared textual form and to its centrality in the Orthodox world in general.

The second methodological point is anticipated by the above remarks. Between the historical-critical exegesis and the hermeneutic expressed in the various texts central to Orthodoxy (such as, liturgy, hymnography, and patristic works) there is an unbridgeable chasm, as it has been evidenced in several recent studies (Legaspi 2011; Bunta 2025; Bunta 2022b)[3]. The former favors meanings, contexts, and methodological procedures—attitudes and interests that are fundamentally historical, of distance from the text—while the latter favors the participation and transformation of the reader, attitudes that abandon history. Furthermore, historical-critical exegesis cannot but close what happens in the text inside the text and its context. This is to say that the text remains always a closed space accessible to examination from without. Contrary to this approach, the biblical texts themselves exhibit features that integrate the hearer-speaker, that inscribe him within themselves. This integration takes place in one bidirectional motion: as I explained elsewhere, the Scriptures not only interpret themselves, interpretation that has already been aptly called "inner-biblical" exegesis[4], but also want to be interpreted in a certain manner, and for this phenomenon I proposed the mirror term of "outer-biblical" exegesis. As I already noted, the substance of this one bidirectional motion is the integration of the hearer-speaker [5] into the text and this is to say that the meaning of a text emerges in the manner in which the hearer-speaker is described and transformed by it.

Unequipped to perceive this hermeneutics that comes out of the Scriptures themselves and that frustrates analytical pursuits, the historical-critical mindset must be put aside for insights from early exegesis or from its forms enduring in living traditions[6]. Nevertheless, the argument of this study is still made possible by recent advancements made in historical criticism (including in a recent book of mine), specifically, by the position that the theology of early Judaism—biblical and para-biblical—conceives a divinity that is fluid and physical, both embodied and shared, in terms similar to the

pro-nicene Alexandrian theology (Bunta 2021)[7]. The principal point of my study is that the divine is also embodied and shared in the encounters with its face in the psalms. These two aspects of this theophanic space—embodiment and sharing—are discrete only from an etic perspective. From an emic position there is no such distinction. Just as in the pro-nicene Alexandrian theology the incarnation of God *is* his sharing (among other things, this is what it means to say that "what has not been assumed has not been healed"), so also in the theological space of the psalms the embodied divine face makes gods. This—I will emphasize as a secondary point—happens not only within the text, but also out of the text: the visionary within the text is deified in the encounter with the divine face just as is also deified the hearer-speaker of the text, whom the text integrates into the same deifying encounter.

My third methodological point is introduced by the fact that this is not only the hermeneutics of the Scriptures themselves, but also the hermeneutics of the Orthodox Tradition. Yet, in this study I will not so much look at how later Orthodox exegesis reads the Scriptures as much as *I will do what Orthodox exegesis does*. In other words, I will work on the Scriptures themselves in an Orthodox manner. In the terms of current study-field differentiations, this is not a study of reception history but a study of the Scriptures themselves. Later on, I will even draw the outlook of the "reception history" category into question[8].

For the naming of this God-space in which divinity is shared in text and through text, I decided to reclaim a term from theosophy—"theopoeia." As far as I can tell, it was coined in English in 1867[9] based on ancient Hermeticism in order to name the ancient art of endowing inanimate representations of the gods with living divinity[10]. Shortly after, it was popularized with this connotation by Helena P. Blavatsky. Yet, early Christian texts use this precise term—it is a Greek word, after all—to denote the very vision that I propose here for a psalmic theology. This ancient sense is the precise opposite of the sense that the term came to acquire in modern usage: it is not that the human being endows with divine life a representation of the divine, as something ultimately distinct from both God and people, but God transforms his own image—the human being—into himself. This early Christian usage of the concept is attested, for example, in the following text from Clement of Alexandria:

> Godliness (*θεοσέβεια*), which assimilates the human being to God as much as it is possible, marks God as a congruent teacher (*κατάλληλον διδάσκαλον*), the one who

> alone can model the human after God as much as it is worthy. The apostle who knows this teaching as truly divine says, "You, O Timothy, from a babe have known the sacerdotal letters (*ἱερὰ γράμματα*), which are able to make you wise unto salvation, through faith that is in Christ" (2 Tim 3:15). For truly holy are the letters that make one sacerdotal and divine (*ἱεροποιοῦντα καὶ θεοποιοῦντα*). (Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* 9.86. 2-9.87.1-2)[11]

It is noteworthy that the Alexandrian theologian perceives the scriptural letters as deifying, a quality that he identifies as sacerdotal or liturgical.

The Face of God in the Text

In the masoretic text of the psalms (henceforth MT) the term "face" (*panim*) occurs 133 times[12]. In the Orthodox Greek text the word that usually translates it, *πρόσωπον*, is used 94 times (including four times in the superscriptions of psalms 3, 33, and 56). Not all of these uses are in reference to the divine face, but what is surprising and particularly significant for my argument about this usage is the fact that at times the divine face is desired and encountered in digestive terms. I will offer only the most significant examples. The translations are all mine and they sacrifice the aesthetic in order to retain the idiosyncrasies of the original text:

> You will fill me of gladness with your Face, delight(s) at your right to the end (*πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου, τερπνότητες/τερπνότης ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ σου εἰς τέλος*—Ps 15:11/12).[13]
>
> But I will appear to your Face in righteousness, I will fatten on the appearance of your Glory (*ἐγὼ δὲ ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ὀφθήσομαι τῷ προσώπῳ σου, χορτασθήσομαι ἐν τῷ ὀφθῆναί μοι τὴν δόξαν σου*—Ps 16:16).
>
> For you will give him blessing to age of age, and will gladden him in delight with your Face (*ὅτι δώσεις αὐτῷ εὐλογίαν εἰς αἰῶνα αἰῶνος, εὐφρανεῖς αὐτὸν ἐν χαρᾷ μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου*—Ps 20:6).
>
> My soul thirsted for the God of strength who lives. When will I come and appear to the Face of God (*ἐδίψησεν ἡ ψυχή μου πρὸς τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἰσχυρὸν, τὸν ζῶντα· πότε ἥξω καὶ ὀφθήσομαι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ*—Ps 41:2)?

Ps 16:16 requires special attention. In general, modern translations of the Greek text—across languages—render *χορτασθήσομαι* as "I will be sated" or "I will be filled." It is possible this translation choice is made with an eye toward the masoretic text,

which has here שבע, "to be sated."[14] Yet, in only 14 out of its 119 appearances does שבע correspond to the LXX *χορτάζω*, including in Ps 16:16[15]. Its corresponding Greek verbs are usually *πίμπλημι* (for the transitive) and *πλήθω* (for the intransitive).

There is a good reason for this: *χορτάζω* is not a good translation of שבע. The latter denotes eating to the point of satiety. The Greek *χορτάζω* has a different connotation. Derived from the noun *χόρτος*, "animal fodder," it originally denoted the domestic feeding of animals, more or less forced. When it started being used for people—such as in Plato—it retained this initial sense and it was pejorative, with the sense of eating without any higher thoughts or leanings, like an animal[16]. In later usage, such as at the time of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, it carries the sense of "to fatten." Therefore, although the Greek verb somewhat overlaps semantically with the Hebrew term, it nevertheless carries a unique aspect: it takes the image of satiety further, into fattening.

Of course, the Hebrew form of Ps 16:16 is also significant, with its parallelism between the beholding of the face and the satiety achieved on the divine form. It is possibly the earliest testimony to the widespread ancient Jewish and Christian tradition of feeding on the divine presence[17]. Yet, the Greek version adds the sense of enlargement to this imagery.

This sense of the verse becomes clearer in its contrast to the preceding verse, 16:15: "They have fattened with sons, and they left the remnants to their children (*ἐχορτάσθησαν υἱῶν*[18] *καὶ ἀφῆκαν τὰ κατάλοιπα τοῖς νηπίοις*[19] *αὐτῶν*)." In the two adjacent verses, the contrast is between the sinner who fattens on the flesh of his own children—a sort of transgenerational and familial cannibalism—and the righteous who fattens on the glory of God, which is the same thing as the divine face. It is shocking but clear that the action of the sinner and of the righteous are one and the same, of expansive feeding (expressed by the same verb *χορτάζω*). The only difference between them is the substance of this action.

Historical-critical approaches can only see in this imagery a metaphorical language, unreal, reduced to effect, the more so the more difficult it is to consider as real the consumption of the flesh of one's own children. As much as this historical-critical perspective resonates with our own (post-)modern sensibilities and as much as these resonances can obscure the presuppositions undergirding this position, assuming that this perspective is purely linguistic would be a fundamental error; rather, it is one of worldview. And herein lies the problem. Such interpretations of the scriptural vocabulary—built on the materialism and intellectualism of modernity—do

not simply solve a literal-metaphoric tension on the side of the metaphoric, but more fundamentally they themselves engender this tension or dichotomy and project it back on the Jewish antiquity in which it has no place (and, I would say, also the Christian antiquity). For the inhabitants of the historical-critical worldview, reality (including the biblical text) is situated on a flat, bidimensional plane, and is splintered among domains that are fundamentally discrete, of different ontologies, even though they may be adjacent and related. Furthermore, one crosses from one domain to another through methodological alternation[20]. In this worldview, the theophagy image in the psalms belongs to the immaterial and—more or less in consequence of this—the unreal, and the correct method leads naturally toward the conclusion that the reader faces poetic expressiveness.

In contrast, in the ancient Jewish (and Christian) perception reality is tridimensional, or rather it is essentially vertical, and the access to it is not methodological and alternative, but ascetical and progressive. The world does not consist of discrete ontologies, even if it is both material and immaterial (it is so at once, in all things). These are only dimensions of the one and same unsplintered life, not domains. The human being participates in these dimensions—or rather is part of them—in a natural and informal manner (even if it may do so with inquisition), and not from the position of a methodologist. As such, the literal and the nonliteral of this worldview do not overlap with the real-material and the unreal-immaterial of (post-)modernity, but are progressive appropriations of the same unsplintered reality. The nonliteral is the literal in hiddenness or depth and the literal is the nonliteral in sight or at surface.

Therefore, in that world so different from ours the human being *truly* fattens—or can fatten—on the face of God, just as it fattens *truly* on the flesh of other people. A breath of fresh air is coming today from the most recent advancements in psychological research, which finally are abandoning the Descartian dichotomizing partition between psyche and body that so defines modernity (even in modernity's complete turn to mechanical materialism and reduction of the psyche to physical activities). Against this background, when St. John Chrysostom uses this very image of cannibalism in reference to the psychosomatic reality of human evil, he cannot be reproached for not speaking of something real, or for not using language in a literal sense[21]. Along the same lines, when, after the discussion with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the Lord Jesus is asked by disciples to eat and he speaks of having fed on the will of the Father (Jn 4:31-34), he still does not partake immediately afterwards of something physical

and the disciples no longer insist on material food. It is improper or anachronistic to wonder whether Christ remained *truly* hungry.

In all of the above there is ample evidence for drawing the very opposite conclusion from the one too commonly advanced by historical-criticism: that the "face of God" in the psalms is a schematic symbol for an immaterial divine presence and that the language of the encounter with it is figurative. The fleshliness of the divine face is especially obvious in the contrast between Ps 16:15 and 16:16. Therefore, when the same shocking Greek verb *χορτάζω* appears in the fourth New Testament beatitude (to which I will return shortly), "Happy are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be fattened (*χορτασθήσονται*)" (Mt 5:6), the conclusion should be that "Righteousness" was meant here as synonymous with an embodied and shared divinity.

Ancient exegesis—both Jewish and Christian—is finely attuned to these intricacies of the scriptural vocabulary and provide congruent interpretations about an embodied divinity shared in transformative and expansive deification[22]. For example, the ancient rabbis—who confront the difficult Hebrew version of Ps 16:16—speak nevertheless of a human transformation[23], even if only eschatological:

> What is the meaning of the words, I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness (Ps 16:16 MT)? R. Nahman b. Isaac said: This refers to the students of the Torah who banish sleep from their eyes in this world, and whom the Holy One, blessed be He, feasts with the resplendence of the Divine presence in the future world. (*Baba Bathra* 10a)[24]

On the Christian side, St. Gregory of Nyssa offers an exemplary interpretation. He even notes the parallelism between Ps 16:16 and Ps 41:2, and also mentions the fourth beatitude:

> The Lord offers himself to the appetite (*ὄρεξις*) of the ones who hear him, he who has become for us "wisdom from God, justification and sanctification and redemption" (l Cor 1:30), but also "bread coming down from heaven" (Jn 6:50) and "living water" (Jn 4:10), for whom David confesses desire in a psalmody, offering to God this most-blessed longing (*τὸ μακαριστὸν τοῦτο πάθος*) of the soul in what he says, "My soul thirsted for the God of strength, who lives. When will I come and appear to the Face of God?" (Ps 41:3). David, it seems to me, . . . also claims for himself the fulfillment of this desire. "But I," he says, "will appear to your Face in righteousness, I will fatten on the appearance

> of your Glory" (Ps 16:16). This [the Glory] then, as I understand it, the true Virtue, the Good unmixed with evil, … God the Word himself, the "Virtue" that, as Habakkuk explains, has covered the heavens (Hab 3:3), and the ones who hunger for this Justification of God were well called "blessed." For the one who tastes God, as the psalmody says (Ps 33:8), that is, the one who received God into himself (*ὁ ἐν ἑαυτῷ δεξάμενος τὸν Θεὸν*), becomes actually full of that for which he thirsted and hungered, according to the promise that says, "I and the Father will come and will dwell in him" (Jn 14:23), of course with the Holy Spirit dwelling there in advance. Thus it also seems to me that the great Paul, who tasted of those forbidden fruits of the paradise and is full of that which he tasted, is also hungry for ever (*ἀεὶ πεινῶν*). For he confesses that he became full of the one desired when he says, "Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20), and that he, as one hungry forever, reaches for those ahead of him (*τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτείνεται*), when he says, "Not that I have already obtained, or that I have already been perfected, but I pursue so that I may also grab" (Phil 3:12). Let us be allowed to say hypothetically—as much as we are able—something that does not exist naturally. It is as if with material food; if nothing of those taken in as food is excreted, but everything is absorbed toward adding to the stature of the body, then the bodies would enlarge in stature ever more, as the daily food would increase their dimensions. In the same manner, this Justification [Christ] and all the virtue that accompanies it—as that which is eaten by a spiritual consumption is not excreted—makes the ones partaking of it ever greater to eternity, always enlarging their dimension by adding to it. (Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes* 4.7)[25]

The image is of the human being becoming divine, becoming a temple that expands in perpetuity to the ever greater size of the containment of the uncontainable God. It should also be noted that Gregory of Nyssa offers a typical early Christian explanation that the "Face" and "Glory" in all the scriptural texts he quotes—including our psalms of reference—are titles of the incarnate Christ, chronology notwithstanding[26]. Furthermore, even though the text indicates the existential and critical character of the divine embodiment in the expanding saint and this character is an important dimension of the Gregorian concept of *epektasis*, it cannot be said that the imagery of human expansion through the filling with God is purely Gregorian. The image that St. Gregory bases on the Scriptures—including on our psalm verses—is also found in earlier authors, besides the aforementioned Scriptures themselves. Three examples should suffice. The first comes from half a century earlier and from a cultural context very different from the Cappadocia of St. Gregory—from Aphrahat of Persia:

660 23 Who has perceived the *place* of knowledge?
24 Who has attained to the roots of wisdom? And who
25 has insight into the *place* of understanding? …
661 6 Whoever has *opened* the *door* of his *heart*
7 finds it, and whoever unfolds the wings of his *intellect*
8 possesses it. It *dwells* in the man who is diligent,
9 and is *implanted* in the *heart* of the sage,
10 whose nerves are set firmly in their sources, and [so]
11 in it [i.e., the heart] he possesses a *hidden treasure*. His thought *flies*
12 to all the *heights*, and his pondering
13 descends to all the depths. …
15 All things created
16 are *enclosed* within his *thought*, and he
17 *becomes vast* so as to receive still more. He becomes
18 the *great temple* of his *Creator*. Indeed, *the King* of the Heights
19 *enters* and *dwells* in him … (Aphrahat the Persian, *Demonstration* 14.35)[27]

The other two authors to employ the same imagery can be cited together, since one of the them—Origen—cites and incorporates the second one, who has already been identified by Gregory of Nyssa—Paul the Apostle:

> "We suffer affliction but we are not in anguish" (2 Cor 4:8). ... Not only does that affliction of the saints contain no anguish (*angustiam*), but it has breadth (*latitudinem*). For this is what the righteous man declares, "You enlarged me in affliction" (Ps 4:1). The Apostle, being himself conscious of this breadth, writes as well to the Corinthians, "You are not anguished over me but you are anguished in your own affections." And he has added, "Enlarge yourselves as well" (2 Cor 6:12–13). This is also the reason why God says concerning his saints, whom he has known to be enlarged (*dilatari*) and who have spacious and broad rooms (*spatia longe lateque diffusa*) in the dwelling place of their hearts (*intra cordis sui domicilium*), "I shall dwell in them and I shall walk about [in them]" (2 Cor 6:16, which quotes Lev 26:12). … God not only dwells in this breadth of heart of his saints, he walks about in it. … That soul that complies with the truth is enlarged and spread out (dilatatur, atque diffunditur) like the heavens. And, illuminated by the rays of the "sun of righteousness" (Mal 3:20), it becomes a palace of Wisdom and Truth [that is, Christ]. (Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 2.6)[28]

A second aspect of theopoeia in the psalms must be mentioned now. Between the deified human face and the divine face there is even a certain mirroring and reciprocity, as Ps 26:11 suggests:

> To you my heart said, I will seek the Lord. *My face* sought you out; *your Face*, O Lord, I will seek (*σοὶ εἶπεν ἡ καρδία μου, Κύριον ζητήσω, ἐξεζήτησέ σε τὸ πρόσωπόν μου· τὸ πρόσωπόν σου, Κύριε, ζητήσω*).

This element gives the psalmic imagery the clearest reverberation with the Sinai narrative, which—among a few other themes—is dominated by the imagery of seeking the face of God. Furthermore, the insistent language of Ps 26:11 is drawn into the inverse parallelism between Sinai and the postlapsarian paradise, parallelism that hinges on more than the word "face": in paradise the first humans hide "from the *face* of the Lord God *in the midst* of the wood" (*ἀπὸ προσώπου κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ ξύλου*, Gn 3:8), on Sinai Moses seeks the face of God who—although he is unveiling his place and his back—hides his face "*from the midst* of the cloud" (*ἐκ μέσου τῆς νεφέλης*, Ex 24:16,18) or "*from the midst* of the fire" (*ἐκ μέσου τοῦ πυρός*, Dt 5:4). Yet, according to the Deuteronomist, Moses' desire does not remain unfulfilled and the prophet finds God "face-against-face" (*πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον*, Dt 5:4; 34:10)[29]. The preposition κατά only accentuates—with overtones of conflict—the reciprocity and interpenetration in the encounter between God's face and his holy person. And this interpenetration stands in sharp contrast to the failed—or rather refused—encounter in paradise. On Sinai and in the psalms the hearer-speaker encounters what in paradise remains unfulfilled: the making of the theopoetic space, in which gods are created and in which God and humans merge and share a common face. The promise of the serpent in Gn 3:5 further frames the paradise narrative in these counter-Sinai terms.

The Face of God through the Text

The second part of my argument is as follows: this theopoetic space—in which the sharing of divinity takes place—is created both within the text, in scriptural characters, and out of the text, in hearers-speakers of the text. This solicitation does not take place only through the co-text, the life that travels with the text, but also through the text itself, through certain irritating and shocking aspects, such as the ones already remarked in our analyzed psalms. Among these I listed elsewhere the following:

incomplete phrases or sentences (left to the new author to complete), peculiar turns of verbal tenses, unexpected uses of pronouns (especially the demonstrative pronoun of proximity), rough or inelegant language, bad or non-idiomatic Greek, ambiguities, and polyvalence (Bunta 2025, 85-103). All these features give the biblical text a function that far exceeds that of narration or idea transmission; they transform the biblical text into a speech in quest of speaker, they solicit a hearer-speaker who appropriates the text as his own. These textual features make the text detectable and meaningful only to the extent to which the hearer-speaker collapses the distance between himself and the text, even to the point of becoming a (new) author of the text.

For this hermeneutic that goes out of the biblical text itself—participative and appropriative, centered anew in each hearer-speaker—I launched the phrase "hermeneutic of death." The phrase is meant to underline the fact that the nature of this hermeneutic is not metaphysical, intellective, formal, and methodological, but rather physical, existential, ascetical, and non-procedural[30]. This hermeneutic is a non-procedure of the discarding of the self, of the abandonment of one's own life in order to take on the life of the King himself. And herein the conundrum of the historical-critical hermeneutics deepens just as its newest methods discard the archaeological and disengaged attitudes of its past: it approaches the scriptural texts not on their own terms that frustrate all methods and the very self of the reader, but quite the opposite—it approaches them with a heightened self, self-affirming and deeply psychological and undeified.

I will provide here as examples only two texts of such ascetical features, texts that I explored more fully in other places (Bunta 2025; Bunta 2022b; Bunta 2023). The first is from the Old Testament, the second from the New Testament. My first text of choice is Dt 5:3. Yet, the point I wish to make about it comes into the clearest focus in view of another text, 4 Kgs 23:3 (MT 2 Kgs 23:3). Here is the latter in my translation attentive to the peculiarities of both the Hebrew and Greek texts. The most relevant of these are in italics:

> The king stood by the pillar and cut *the* covenant before the Lord—to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his laws with all heart and all soul, to carry out the words of *this* covenant that were inscribed upon *this* scroll. And all the people stood in *the* covenant.

The most impressive feature of this early covenant text lies in the equivalent use of the definite article "the" and of the demonstrative pronoun "this" in the words of the "narrator," as it were. As Hindy Najman observed,

> Deuteronomic texts do not use such terms ["the" and "this"] from the point of view of a specified speaker—say, of Moses. Rather, they use such terms within anonymous third person descriptions of the speech and actions of Moses. That is to say, they use such terms *from the point of the view of the text's reader or listener*. This is of great importance, for it follows that the unity of Torah, in the special sense of the Deuteronomist, is secured through *the presence of tradition to those who read or hear the words of Torah* (Najman 2003, 31-32 – her emphasis).

I would take Najman's argument further by suggesting that this language makes the "covenant" a manner of life that, first, the scriptural author claims as his own and that, second, he also expects to be the life of his readers/hearers. Furthermore, such language serves the obvious function of a self-destruct safety feature. It is precisely this manner of writing that makes the whole text collapse, become nonsensical, in the hands of another life, including—to adopt our modern perspective—in the hands of a methodological, intellectual approach. In other words, the text is written in such ways that it can only be approached by sharing in its manner of living, or in such ways that, without sharing its life, one cannot reach its meanings.

In light of this, Moses' emphatic negative in Deut. 5:3—my focus text—is best understood not as a polemic against earlier covenants (such as the covenant with Abraham), as the current scholarship sees it, but more precisely as a warning against and prevention of any lifeless, static understandings of the covenant of the Lord with Israel. In my more literal translation, Moses shouts to Israel just before crossing the Jordan:

> It was not with *our* fathers that the Lord cut *this* covenant, but with *us*, *we these* here today, all of *us* living.

The first shocking thing about this shout of Moses is how historically untrue its point is. Dt 1:35-40 has already made it abundantly clear that the people whom Moses is addressing here were not at Sinai, but rather the people at Sinai *were* their fathers, who by now are all dead. The Hebrew text is even more striking than the Greek

because it uses the personal pronoun "we" three times (as opposed to only twice in Greek) and once even accompanied by the demonstrative pronoun "these," which is missing in Greek. Yet, in both versions this text exhibits a self-understanding in which the covenant does not even have a historical life. The only "real time" of the covenant, as it were, is in its appropriation in each generation, in the "living" ones, the ones who actually shout these words in their own reading of the text. The shout of Moses, with its striking use of personal and demonstrative pronouns, is supposed to make the hearer of the text realize that the truthfulness of the shout is relinquished by history—by the people who were at Sinai and who are dead by the time of this shout—to the writer and ultimately to the hearer of the text, the one who is actually always "living" and who speaks the shout fresh in every generation. In other words, the text always finds anew its real time in the living speaker/hearer[31].

My second text of choice is John 10:34–36:

> [34] Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law that I said, you are gods? [35] If those to whom the word (λόγος) of God came to be, he called (εἶπεν) 'gods'—and the Scripture is incapable of being loosened—[36] you tell the word whom (ὅν) the Father sanctified and sent into the world, You blaspheme, because I said I am son of God?

Before making my point, I must decry the fact that scriptural translations are still beholden to modern grammatical conventions that deeply impede an accurate transmission of the texts. In the case of John 10:34–36, the modern convention that damages the text is the quotation marks. In the original text, Jesus can be saying both "Is it not written in your law that, 'I have said, you are gods'?" and "Is it not written in your law that I have said, 'you are gods'?" If the latter, Jesus clearly presents the divine speech in the psalm as his own voice. One may be tempted to solve this ambiguity, but I argued in a recent publication that this ambiguity is essential to the meaning of this pericope: depending on the readiness of the hearer, at its deeper level the ambiguity reveals the "word" not only as the Scripture, but also as the voice *in* the Scriptures *and* the one whom the Father sent into the world. Furthermore, in the very first verse, in both possible readings, Jesus uses the plural personal pronoun "you" in such a way that there is no distinction between the people who hear his voice in the gospel moment ("Is it not written in *your* law") and the people who hear his voice in the psalm ("that I said, you are gods?"). This sameness is reinforced in the second and third verse, in the

equivalence between "those to whom" the word in the psalm came and "you" who call the word blasphemer. The absoluteness of the present tense in the clause "the Scripture is incapable of being loosened" further secures this reinforcement in complex ways that I can only leave unexplored here.

Therefore, in a deeper sense, Jesus is the one who speaks to the Jews in the pericope, the one who speaks the psalm, and the one who speaks in the psalm. The manner in which Christ references the psalm amounts to a collapse of any difference and distance between the voice *in* the psalm and the voice *to* the Jews. The inevitable conclusion is that the psalm is not pre-existing the gospel scene at all. Rather, it will be written in the past as merely the memory, or rather immortalization of the current gospel moment, which, as simultaneous with all time, undergirds eternity[32].

Furthermore, this particular eternal moment in John 10 extends to the hearers-speakers of the gospel itself, as an unveiling of Christ in all time, including in the time of the hearers of the new Scripture—the gospel text. As John words and frames the text, the existential confrontation with divinity ultimately belongs to humanity overall. The only way in which the words of the gospel-psalm moment will "ring true" and will reveal ever deeper meanings of their complexity, as the gospel itself wishes, is if its own hearers become participants in this moment.

Finally, for this new scriptural text, just as for the aforementioned Old Testament texts, the trip from what is perceived (text and history) to what simply is (which is invariably divinity) is not metaphysical, chronological, or deductive, but physical, internal, and experiential. The gospel-psalm moment and the beyond-the-Jordan moment are tantamount to an existential crisis and their truthfulness can be arrived at only through the surrender of the discrete and differentiating self. To put it differently and in a Christian frame, the entry point into the scriptural words is the Word crucified and resurrected. John's hearers within the gospel and the hearers through the gospel, just as Moses' hearers within and through Deuteronomy, will arrive at what divinity is saying (to avoid verbs of intellection) precisely to the extent to which they are crushed by its winning, or rather by its obliterating presence. As I already remarked, this is the essence of the Orthodox hermeneutics as witnessed in its traditional texts—hymnographical, liturgical, iconographical, patristic, etc.[33]

From the vantage point afforded by these texts—post-scriptural and scriptural—the life or transmission of the Scripture is not *actually* made up of original composition and subsequent appropriations, because such history or sequence exists only to the

extent to which such texts lower themselves *aesthetically* (I use this adverb in its etymological sense) away from what they mean to do toward superficial encounters. This can be presented as a dynamic: a speech that is scriptural pulls constantly toward the collapse of all distinctions between its initial composition and the moments when it is heard and spoken afresh by each living speaker-hearer.

To return to the specific focus of this study, the hermeneutic is the same in the following psalmic text about the divine face:

> This is the generation (*αὕτη ἡ γενεά*) of the ones who seek the Lord, of the ones who seek the Face of the God of Jacob.
>
> Lift up the gates, your rulers, and be lifted up, eternal gates, and the King of glory will enter.
>
> Who is this, the King of glory? The Lord ruling and powerful, the Lord powerful in battle. (Ps 23:6-8)

The text is remarkable in several ways. First, the dialogue in the final two verses—as well known as it is and as much as it has a long history in Christian liturgy to this day[34]—is strikingly unintroduced and contextless. There is no indication of the identity of the ones engaged in this dialogue, although the superscription places the entire psalm on the sabbath and, therefore, in liturgy. Second, if, by contrast, in these final two verses the Lord is introduced, and even with a sense of tension, in the first verse he is sought. Third, the first verse draws a clear equivalence between the "face" of the Lord and the Lord himself.

Yet, the most striking feature of the text is in the opening phrase: "this is the generation." First and foremost, the demonstrative pronoun of proximity calls on any hearer-speaker of the text to be present at the words of the psalmist. And second, to the extent to which the hearer-speaker holds this position of presentness, to the same extent his distinction from the psalmist collapses and turns into a sameness under the pressure of the entire phrase. This is because the demonstrative pronoun "this" in its predicative attachment to "generation" can only be valid or "true" as current, especially as the phrase lacks any historiographic or third-voice framing. In other words, the phrase cannot exist in the past but only in the present. It can only be true in its current hearer-speaker, who—upon its reception—becomes its one and real author. This situation is only strengthened by the final verses, which—as a dialogue—are an expression of the present time *par excellence* and whose speakers are left to receive an identity or

embodiment through appropriation. And, significantly, this identity that can only exist in the real time of the present is defined by its seeking and encountering the divine face. The liturgical uses of the dialogue—already set up by the superscription—seem to be engendered precisely by the dialogue's openness to and need for appropriation.

Final thoughts

The evidence presented in this study highlights a fundamental problem with the historical-critical approach: its methods will obscure what the language in front of them wishes to do precisely to the extent to which they will succeed. They fail at encountering the text as it wishes to be encountered—and cannot but fail—through their very success. Of course, these methods can clarify some aspects of the scriptural text, but these clarifications are not the purpose and the significance of the text, that which the text itself pursues.

Emblematic of this outer-biblical exegesis (exegesis that comes out of the Scriptures themselves) is what happens to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The scene is hermeneutical not by the presentation of a metaphysical procedure (which is not there), but a physical transformation. Significantly, the text is given an initial, superficial interpretation in advance of this transformation, but the ultimate interpretation—in the form of the recognition of Christ as the one content of the Scriptures—does not truly happen until the eyes are opened and the heart is set alight, which is a theophanic language that presents the inside of the disciples as a divine space. This means—among other things—that the encounter with Christ is not a cognitive unlocking of the text, a sort of locating of Christ's life and teachings within the scriptural text (this thing in Christ or in his life is that phrase or verse), but as an opening of the hearer-speaker in a transformative participation in God. Even better, the encounter of Christ as the substance of the Scriptures is the making of a divine space in which God, words, writer, and hearer-speaker are all one divinity. Also, in my opinion, keeping in mind the topic of this study, it is significant that the unveiling of the divine is ultimately granted to the disciples in eating, in the act of feeding on God.

This shocking vocabulary cannot be attributed dismissively to a metaphoric language or a primitive culture. On the contrary, the more this language is explored in all openness, the more it unveils its depth and sophistication. It attests to the making of a human being who comes out of this scriptural molding with divine potentiality and as integrated into God himself, a human who feeds on the substance of eternity.

Notes

[1] In a first draft this study was presented at the conference "'Face' of God in the Old Testament" organized online by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the Babeș-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), between November 27-29, 2024. I wish to thank the conveners of the conference for their invitation to the conference, especially the Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă and the Rev. Deacon Lecturer Stelian Pașca-Tușa.

[2] The Pantokrator manuscript is published in — 2004. The Greek Manuscript 2132 of St. Catherine's Monastery of Sinai was accessed through the "Library of Congress Collection of Manuscripts in St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai" here: https://www.loc.gov/collections/manuscripts-in-st-catherines-monastery-mount-sinai/.

[3] In Orthodox hymnography one can repeatedly hear a point against inquisitive approaches. The following example should suffice:

> Your bodiless angels did not understand how you became incarnate, the soldiers guarding you did not perceive when you resurrected, for both have been sealed to those who would inquire (ἀμφότερα γὰρ ἐσφράγισται τοῖς ἐρευνῶσι), but the wonders have been revealed to those who worship the mystery in faith (τοῖς προσκυνοῦσιν ἐν πίστει τὸ μυστήριον). (Resurrectional sticheron, plagal 1, in my translation from — 1864, 103)

[4] For the initial meaning of this phrase, see especially Fishbane 1980; idem 1985; idem 1996. In several studies the terminology has received proposals for further sharpening and differentiation, such as in Eslinger 1980; Meek 2014.

[5] I prefer "hearer" to "reader" for two reasons. First, until recently listening has been the manner in which the vast majority of people approached the scriptural text, and certainly it was the ancient way in which the text expected to be received. Moreover, it remains the way inscribed in Orthodox liturgy. Second, the point can be made that "interpretation" or "reading" are not proper words to describe the way in which the Orthodox Tradition views and practices access to and contact with the Scriptures. See also Bunta 2023; Bunta 2025.

[6] For more on this mismatch between historical criticism and the hermeneutical expectations of the Scriptures themselves, and on the privileged position of early exegesis, see my observations in Bunta 2019, 135-138.

[7] For this emerging conclusion, see especially Sommer 2009; Wagner 2010; Knafl 2014; Smith 2016; Halton 2021; Wilson 2021.

[8] I already criticized elsewhere what I perceive as misdirections in current Orthodox attitudes toward the Scriptures (Bunta 2022b). It seems to me that the substance of these

is an inability to read the Scriptures on their own terms (not by themselves, but within themselves). First, in these, Scripture and Tradition serve the modern "theologian" for evidentiary and explanatory purposes and are turned into "sources of Orthodox doctrine," crutches of the contemporary need for confirmation and certainty. Second, a common warning would have Scripture handled only through "Tradition"—the underlying assumption being that Tradition is mostly (if not wholly) external to it. Even worse, when these attitudes are refuted, the alternative offered is an uncritical appropriation of historical criticism (the contradiction in this position is evident). For all practical purposes, such instincts in the contemporary Orthodox mindset place the Scriptures (especially the Old Testament) in an awkward inferiority to the "fathers of the Church" (and, even further, to current specializations). Ironically, this is precisely what the fathers of the Church do not do themselves and do not wish others to do. They look at the scriptural writers as their teachers, a sort of Fathers of the fathers, and nowhere—to my knowledge—do they imagine their teachers as being incomplete or inaccurate, as needing them. Therefore, for accuracy against the fathers themselves, it is essential that the Scripture be seen "on its own terms."

[9] — 1867, 279.

[10] Augustine gives the following example, before he quotes Hermes Trismegistus:

> To unite, therefore, these invisible spirits to visible objects of bodily substance by some strange technique, so that the result is something like animated bodies, idols dedicated and subject to these spirits, this, Hermes says, is "making gods" (*deos facere*), and this great and miraculous power, he adds, of making gods has been given to men" (*De Civitate Dei* 8.23, text and translation from Augustine 1968, 105-107).

[11] My translation of the original Greek from Clément d'Alexandrie 1949, 154. All translations in this study are my own, unless noted otherwise.

[12] On the divine face in post-biblical Judaism, see especially Orlov 2004; idem 2006; idem 2017; Bunta 2006.

[13] This and all ensuing translations of the Greek Psalter are taken from my translation in Bunta 2022a.

[14] The situation is not reciprocated by studies on the Hebrew texts: very few interpreters of the Hebrew text have paid attention to the Greek, although the former is difficult (here with all the masoretic diacritics):

אֲנִי בֶּצֶדֶק אֶחֱזֶה פָּנֶיךָ אֶשְׂבְּעָה בְהָקִיץ תְּמוּנָתֶךָ׃
As for me, I will behold your face in righteousness;
I will be satisfied [with] your form in awaking.

As many have recognized, starting with the earliest interpreters, the text does not make much sense. The greatest difficulty is presented by the phrase "in awaking" בהקיץ, which has no contextual basis. Hans-Joachim Kraus and most interpreters, ancient and modern, are forced to pair it up with "in the evening" of verse 3 and to assume that it is a random reference to the conclusion of a vigil (Kraus 1988, 1:250).

Despite these difficulties, any attention to the Greek text is rare. Kraus makes no mention of it (Kraus 1988, 1:250). The variant is not addressed at all in the otherwise impressive study of Dominique Barthélemy (Barthélemy 2005). When attention is given, it is usually limited to the problem phrase בהקיץ. The common proposal is that behind the Greek *ἐν τῷ ὀφθῆναι* is בהציץ (the proposal is already launched in Van der Ploeg 1965, 289). Yet, if הקיץ is vocalized not as a hiphil, but a hophal (הקץ), it would translate well with *ἐν τῷ ὀφθῆναι*. קיץ does not only mean "to awake," but also "to show up," "to emerge," "to appear," "to reveal oneself." It is used in reference to God several times, sometimes synonymously with קום. For example, in Ps 44:24 (LXX 23) and 27 (LXX 26) God's arising is rendered by both קיץ and קום. The imagery has an indubitable war connotation. When God is called to arise he is usually summoned for defending Israel against the nations (e.g., Ps 9:19; 102:13) or the righteous against his oppressors (e.g., Ps 3:7). Yet, this is not always the case. Ps 68:1 (LXX 67:1) has a broader martial imagery and in relation to the divine face:

יָקוּם אֱלֹהִים יָפוּצוּ אוֹיְבָיו וְיָנֻסוּ מְשַׂנְאָיו מִפָּנָיו׃
Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered;
let those who hate him flee before his face!
Ἀναστήτω ὁ θεός, καὶ διασκορπισθήτωσαν οἱ ἐχθροὶ αὐτοῦ,
καὶ φυγέτωσαν οἱ μισοῦντες αὐτὸν ἀπὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ.

The verse has a close parallel in Num 10:35 (LXX 10:34):

וַיְהִי בִּנְסֹעַ הָאָרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה יְהוָה וְיָפֻצוּ אֹיְבֶיךָ וְיָנֻסוּ מְשַׂנְאֶיךָ מִפָּנֶיךָ׃
Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate you flee before your face."
ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ ἐξαίρειν τὴν κιβωτὸν καὶ εἶπεν Μωυσῆς Ἐξεγέρθητι, κύριε, διασκορπισθήτωσαν οἱ ἐχθροί σου, φυγέτωσαν πάντες οἱ μισοῦντές σε.

The parallelism also extends to Ps 132:9 (LXX 8) and 2 Chr 6:41. These calls to God have a ceremonial connotation. In this case פנים should be assumed to be more than a mere adverb, as unfortunately it is commonly translated into English ("from before you"). All these texts suggest that the language of the arising/appearing of God was used for cultic theophany.

Therefore, it is very possible the Greek translator of Ps 16:16 (LXX) drew on this usage to understand קיץ to refer to the revelation of God in the temple. Moreover, the fact that תְּמוּנָתֶךָ lacks a preposition (even though being the complement of אֶשְׂבְּעָה would require it) presents it as a natural candidate for the genitive of the infinitive construct of קיץ. Thus, these two considerations—the cultic-theophanic use of God's arising and the un-prepositional form of תְּמוּנָתֶךָ after the infinitive construct of an arising verb—make the rendering "in the appearance of your form/glory" a logical step.

The option of *ὀφθήσομαι τῷ προσώπῳ σου* for אֶחֱזֶה פָּנֶיךָ (I will behold your face) is another case of punctuation. If חָזָה is not vocalized as a qal (אֶחֱזֶה), but rather as a niphal, אֵחָזֶה, I will be seen/I will appear, it translates very well with *ὀφθήσομαι*.

[15] Unfortunately Tobit 12:9 is not attested at Qumran. In all the other 13 instances, the Qumranic Hebrew texts have עבש, just like the masoretic text.

[16] Cf. Plato, *Republic* 2.372b-d and 9.586a.

[17] On the imagery of consumption of the divine presence in ancient Jewish and Christian mysticism see Chernus 1982, 74-87; Fletcher-Louis 1997, 66-68; Goodman 1986; Golitzin 2009; Stuckenbruck 2007, 723-725.

[18] Pantokrator 43 has *ὑείων*.

[19] Snagov has *νιπίοις*.

[20] It should be noted that, as reality splinters ever more, the methodological alternation also increases in consequence of this and the historical-critical perspective cannot avoid an unending methodological splintering.

[21] Such as in *On the Statues* 3.12.

[22] It would be a fundamental mistake to even raise the issue of the authenticity of these claims, that the righteous enlarge in order to contain the uncontainable God. What has been pointed out about ancient apocalyptic writers is equally applicable to these early Christian voices: they do not (consciously) make up traditions. They rather see themselves operating within existing traditions with roots in the authoritative past (DeConick 2001, 52). For the religious sensibilities of the mystical experiencer it would have been highly sacrilegious to make unfounded claims about visions or revelations, just as much as it would have been sacrilegious to innovate or to claim authorship for a tradition—innovation and tradition authorship constituting one and the same reality by their standards (Najman 2003, 12-15). Therefore, the question that the student of early

Christian mysticism must ask is not whether the ancient voice (individual or collective) has the ability to construct false claims or make up complex belief systems, but rather what this voice would deem as improper ways of living, "reading," and expressing.

[23] On the physical transformation of the righteous into divinity in classical rabbinic literature, see Bunta 2021, 197-218. The study also makes the point that the luminosity of the divine in these texts is not immaterial.

[24] The passage has a close parallel:

> R. Judah, son of R. Hiyya said: Any disciple of the Sages who occupies himself with Torah in poverty will have his prayer heard; as it is stated: For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem; thou shalt weep no more; He will surely be gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear, He will answer thee, and it continues, And the Lord will give you bread in adversity and water in affliction. R. Abbahu said: They also satisfy him from the lustre of the *Shechinah*, as it is stated: Thine eyes shall see thy Teacher. (*Sotah* 49a)

These translations of the Babylonian Talmud are from Epstein 1935-1952.

[25] My translation after Migne 1857-1866, 44:1245C-1248B. The reader of this passage must keep in mind that the Greek version of Hab 3:2-3 is very different from the Hebrew that we know. Here it is in my translation:

> Lord, I have heard a report of you, and was afraid. I considered your works, and was amazed: you will be known between the two living creatures. . . His virtue covered the heavens, and the earth is full of his praise.

[26] On the presence of the incarnate Christ in the Old Testament (and on the Augustinian turn from this traditional point of view) see especially Capes 1992; Fossum 1987; Gieschen 2003; Daniélou 1977, 147–163; Barnes 2003; Bucur 2008; Nellas 1987; Bucur 2018.

[27] Translation from Golitzin 2003, 397-398 (his emphasis).

[28] Translation from Origen 2001, 121–122; the Latin is from Origen 1990–1998.

[29] The phrase is not idiomatic Greek. The idiomatic phrase would be *πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον*. Outside of Deuteronomy the phrase *πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον* appears in only one other verse, Ezek 20:35, a text that alludes to Sinai.

[30] The current interest with "reception history," as much as it useful, may still miss this essential point: the essence of reception history itself, or that which reception history itself is made of, is not an intellectual appropriation of the scriptural text, driven by

questions of method and meanings, but it is rather fundamentally ascetical. And this is the very non-historical substance of the so-called field of "reception history," which, although belonging to this ancient hermeneutic, is constantly in danger of being read through the historical premises and methods of modern hermeneutics.

[31] The text acts only as an intermediary between, or rather a medium of different appropriations of the same live event, in the circular trajectory event-text-event. The text exists only in order to cease to exist. The Sinai tradition presents itself as always ultimately fulfilled in the present reader. Moreover, in this very act of giving life to the text in himself, the reader surrenders his own life. The one who writes, that which is written, the one who is talked about, and the one who reads, all these collapse into one identity, into one life; the reading is at once both the death of the text and the death of the reader, because it is precisely the end of selves.

[32] The elimination of the ambiguity through quotation marks as in the first possibility presented above—the possibility invariably chosen by modern English translations—"solves" the text by opting for its one superficial meaning.

[33] A similar understanding of exegesis is expressed by classical rabbinic sources. It has been noted before that the rabbis "imagined themselves . . . participating in Torah rather than operating on it at an analytic distance" (Burns 1992, 115) and did so in an "effort to reconstitute the original experience of revelation" (Wolfson 1997, 328). Elliot Wolfson points out that the early kabbalah conceives of exegesis similarly. In exegesis the reader "cleaves to God" (Zohar 3:36a; Wolfson 1997, 333, 372; see also Fishbane 1998, 105–122). The three-dimensional and experiential nature of the biblical text is stated explicitly in the following text:

> Whoever is engaged in Torah, it is as if he is engaged in the palace of the Holy One, Blessed be He, for the supernal palace of the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah. (*Zohar* 2:200a, from Wolfson 1997, 373)

In this palace, the reader becomes righteous:

> Come and see: When a person draws close to the Torah, which is called good, as it is written, "the teaching of your mouth (torat pikha) is good to me" (Ps 119:72), he draws close to the Holy One, blessed be He, who is called good, as it is written, "The Lord is good to all" (ibid. 145:9), and he then comes close to being righteous, as it says, "Happy is the just man for he is good" (Is 3:9). When he is righteous the Shekhinah rests upon him and teaches him the highest secrets of Torah, for the Shekhinah is joined only to one who is good, for the Righteous [masculine

> Saddiq] and Righteousness [feminine Seddeq] go together as one. (*Zohar Hadash* 29a, from Wolfson 1997, 373)

An actual exegetical transformation is depicted as follows:

> R. Isaac said: One day I went with [R. Simeon] on the road and he opened his mouth in [explication of the] Torah. I saw a pillar of cloud fixed from above to below and one splendor shone within that pillar. (*Zohar* 2:149a; Wolfson 1997, 372)

The text leaves it to the imagination of the reader to see R. Simeon inseparable from the Torah, as that splendor.

[34] On this history see among others Daniélou 1977, 259-260; Bertonière 1972, 201 and 241-276; Karalis 2020.

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The 'face of God' and the Invocation of Divine Mercy in the Psalms

Abstract

This research examines the symbolism of the 'face of God' as a representation of divine presence and mercy, which is crucial in the dialogue between the believer and the divine. Using powerful biblical imagery, the Psalms highlight the importance of divine reconciliation, urging God to turn His face toward those who suffer, symbolizing not just acceptance and approval but also a deep, personal connection. In patristic writings, including those of St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril of Alexandria, this theme reveals the complexity of the relationship between divine mercy and human prayer. The study's comparative approach brings the Psalms and patristic texts into dialogue, exploring how mercy petitions serve as a foundation for rebuilding the lost spiritual relationship. The research shows that the symbol of the 'divine face' signifies an act of mercy and love necessary for experiencing divine protection and blessings. By studying selected Psalms, it becomes clear how this image is crucial in overcoming spiritual struggles and maintaining trust and hope, aiding in the revival of spiritual bonds. The findings underscore the significance of the return of the divine face in biblical spirituality, emphasizing its importance for inner peace and spiritual fulfilment. The study advocates for a sincere relationship with the divine, where prayer is not just a plea but a profound spiritual exchange and transformative dialogue with God.

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Introduction

The present study investigates the significant connection between mercy and the manifestation of divine presence, symbolized by the 'face of God.' The psalmists frequently use vivid imagery to express the need for divine intervention in human life, often requesting that God turn his face toward the supplicant. This theme has been widely debated in patristic literature, where the terms 'mercy' and 'countenance' acquire complex meanings, analysed in various ways by theologians and biblical scholars. Biblical literature highlights the significance of the divine face as a symbol of God's presence, closeness, and benevolence.

Essential resources in this study include theological works that offer detailed analyses of the Hebrew and Greek contexts of the terms used in the Psalms. Patristic commentaries and interpretations also play a crucial role, highlighting the profound symbolic depth of the relationship between divinity and humanity. Some aspects of patristic literature add a theological and spiritual dimension, utilizing linguistic symbolism and biblical imagery to illustrate the connection between divine mercy and the face of God. Church Fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and St. Augustine, among others, offer detailed insights into the theological significance of God's face, highlighting the connection between the plea for mercy and the desire to see His face. These interpretations are not only theoretical but also practical, guiding believers on how to approach prayer and spiritual interaction with the divine.

The study's approach is based on a comparative textual analysis of Psalms and patristic texts, incorporating both historical and contemporary interpretations of these texts. Beginning with a detailed exegesis of selected Psalms, the research examines mercy petitions and how they underscore the desire to reestablish divine fellowship. The invocation of God's face is not only a plea for favour but also a symbol of spiritual renewal and genuine connection with the divine.

The study's structure follows a systematic approach, beginning by defining and contextualizing the theme in the Psalms, and then proceeding to analyse the symbolism of God's face and the invocation of mercy. Next, it offers a detailed exploration of patristic interpretations and finally presents conclusions that highlight the connection between divine mercy and its symbolic expression. The study aims to give a comprehensive framework for understanding how psalmic prayer transcends time and space while remaining a means for drawing closer to God.

Psalms of divine mercy

The mercy Psalms are characterized by repeated expressions and formulas, reflecting the urgent need for help and the close bond between the petitioner and God. First, the imperative formula חָנֵּנִי translated as 'have mercy on me,' appears only in the Old Testament Psalms, used 18 times across 13 Psalms (4:2; 6:3; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:11; 31:10; 41:5,11; 51:3; 56:2; 57:2; 86:3,16; 119:29,58,132 MT), indicating a pattern of direct prayer addressed to God (Botterweck & Ringgren 1986, 32). The verb form, built from an imperative in the first person, masculine, singular, emphasizes the urgency and sincerity of the plea, highlighting the personal dialogue and the intimate relationship between the petitioner and God. This formula conveys not just a passive request, but a direct conversation filled with emotional intensity and hope for divine mercy. Additionally, the use of יהוה חָנֵּנִי – "Lord have mercy on me" – gives the prayer an intimate tone and expresses deep trust in divine mercy.

In the Septuagint, the verb חָנַן is translated as οἰκτίρω (*to pity* or *have compassion*) or ἐλεέω (*to show mercy* or *benevolence*), emphasizing the personal and active relationship of the divine in the process of mercy (Kittel 1976, v. 5, 159-61; v. 2, 477-87). In the Psalms, these formulas are often accompanied by the singular personal pronoun με – *on me, me* – or the plural ἡμᾶς – *on us* – highlighting both individual appeal and its universality. Notably, these formulas tend to be repetitive, placing the prayer within a context of hope and trust in divine mercy. They reflect an attitude of submission and reliance on divine mercy, while also acknowledging human vulnerability in the face of divinity. Their imperative form not only underscores the need for divine help but also incorporates sacred rhetoric that draws the believing soul closer to the God of mercy.

The basic meaning of the noun חֵן is that of *grace*, *favour*, *mercy*, or *goodwill*. In the 69 occurrences in Scripture, most biblical authors use it in contexts where this 'mercy' or 'grace' is not only a favour offered in abundance, but also a disposition, a state of mind, a benevolent intention. Of these occurrences, 43 are part of the expression מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי translated as "to find grace and mercy in the eyes of God or man" (Harris 1999, 299). In this formulation, the emphasis falls not only on the act of being received, but also on the subjective perception of the one receiving: that experience of grace becomes visible, palpable, and often associated with the face or countenance of the giver. In this sense, we also note that between the verb חָנַן and the noun חֵן, which outline

the universe of God's unconditional mercy, we observe a fundamental distinction in the way they highlight the subtle relationship between the giver and the receiver of mercy. If חָנַן focuses on the action of mercy, engaging the attention and initiative of the one who has the favour to offer it, then חֵן is directed toward the receiver, the person or being who receives that mercy and what is given. In essence, if the verb emphasizes the act of giving, the noun emphasizes the reception and impact of this divine or human gesture.

In Antiquity, seeking human mercy or grace in someone's gaze often became a significant experience. A person's benevolent gaze, expression, and face symbolized mercy, compassion, and kindness (Botterweck 1986, 24). The sparkle of gentle eyes, frequently mentioned in sacred texts, can be easily seen as a sign of a positive disposition. Someone with clear, kind eyes communicated, without words, a willingness to grant grace or show mercy to those suffering. This powerful symbolism, reflected in social and cultural perceptions, suggests that the face and appearance reveal the actual state of mind and morality of both the giver and the receiver.

The association of God's face with the outpouring of his mercy

The psalmists often link the concept of mercy (חֵן) with פָּנֶה – 'face', suggesting that showing or turning the face toward someone symbolizes goodwill or rejection. The act of 'turning one's face away' is more than poetic; it's a metaphor for moral and emotional attitude. When God shows His face, it indicates His willingness to be kind, favourable, and merciful. Hiding His face symbolizes contempt or rejection. If God turns His face away, prayers may go unanswered, and blessings may be delayed or absent. This visual gesture signals mercy or its absence. Culturally and anthropologically, the idea of 'showing one's face' to express kindness or concealment is crucial for understanding social and religious bonds in Ancient Israel. A person's gaze reflects their moral and emotional state, and when it comes to the divine, this symbolism becomes even more significant. When God reveals Himself, it is believed that He is in a good mood, acknowledges prayer, and demonstrates love and mercy. Conversely, if He remains hidden or turns His face away, it signifies a lack of divine mercy, causing prayers to go unheard and unfulfilled. Showing one's face is not just a gesture but a tangible sign of divine concern, generosity, and mercy. Trust in God's mercy and His willingness to turn

toward the believer nurtures hope and optimism, even during the most difficult times of suffering.

The connection between mercy and face reflects a core idea in biblical spirituality: God's active and personal presence, symbolized by the look and manifestation of His face (Freedman 2000, 744). This symbol is not just poetic; it expresses the believer's deep longing to see God and witness divine goodness and mercy. The concept of the 'face of God' thus calls to mind a close relationship and communion, where God is not distant but reveals His mercy and goodness through visible gestures understood by the entire community of believers. In the Psalms and other biblical writings, this image remains a promise and a hope, directed to God and implicitly to believers seeking mercy, protection, and spiritual fulfilment.

The expression 'face of God' carries profound theological meaning in Jewish and biblical tradition, symbolizing the presence, manifestation, and closeness of the divine to humanity. In the religious culture of Ancient Israel, divine revelation was not seen merely as a distant display of a supreme power. Still, it was expressed through the visual image of God's 'face'. This image was not just a rhetorical device but a way to indicate Yahweh's active and immediate presence among the people, implying personal, direct, and intimate closeness. In Exodus 33, the most explicit biblical passage where Yahweh promises that his 'face' will go with Israel, it suggests that divinity is not confined to a distant absence but is manifested in a living, close, and personal manner. Moses' request to see God's 'glory' shows a desire for certainty and confirmation of Yahweh's ongoing presence among the Israelites – a need to perceive Him tangibly. God responds by saying that no man can see His face and live (Ex 33:20). This underscores the impossibility of fully seeing the divine face, as God remains unfathomable and unseen, and His complete revelation is beyond human reach (Durham 2002, 458; St. Gregory of Nyssa 1982, 88-99).

However, it is believed that God can reveal Himself in certain forms, as illustrated by the patriarch Jacob, who 'saw Him face to face' in Penuel, and by the experience of Moses, who also spoke with God 'face to face.' These examples demonstrate a special closeness, a communion of trust and intimacy. For these reasons, Edmond Jacob pointed out that:

> Face has never ceased to be regarded as a divine revelation'; the pursuit of Yahweh's face, or his personal presence, encompasses both Temple worship and communion with

> God through personal prayer (Ps 62:3-4; 99:3; 17:14). The faithful believed that seeking His face would be rewarded with Yahweh's blessing, which specifically involved Him turning His face toward them: Let Yahweh seek upon you with a cheerful countenance and have mercy on you! (Num 6:25; cf. Ps 79:4,8,20) (Jacob 1955, 62).

Thus, in essence, the 'face' of God embodies both man's desire to claim and understand Him and the impossibility of perceiving Him completely. This tension highlights the incompleteness and mystery of divinity, while also affirming the reality of visual perception in symbolic and spiritual forms. The 'face of God' remains a symbol of closeness, personal revelation, and divine love—a promise of encounter and intimate communication—even if this divine light often stays out of human reach.

The return/appearance of God's face in the Psalms of divine mercy

In the Psalms of Mercy, the concept of seeing God's face and using it as a symbol of divine mercy is central to the theology of God's presence and the relationship between the sacred and the human. This symbolism originates in the biblical language and culture of Israel, where the 'face' of God does not refer to a physical image but instead represents the goodness, mercy, and active presence of the divine in believers' lives. In this context, the divine 'face' symbolizes the cooperation between heaven and earth, as well as between God and humanity, and reflects God's attitude toward humans.

Psalm 4 highlights the divine presence, symbolized by the 'face of God,' as the source of blessing, mercy, and peace for believers (Craigie 2002, 82). The psalmist asks God to shine His face upon the people so that mercy, peace, and prosperity may flow continuously to all. This divine presence is not just a visible sign but a work that subtly and profoundly leaves an impression on everyone, spreading rays of light that bring joy and peace to the soul. Because of this presence, the psalmist finds immense pleasure and complete peace, even in the face of enemies, symbolized by peaceful sleep (Schaefer 2001, 13-4). St. John Chrysostom explains that the light of God's face is not shown by a visible radiance but by an imprint on the face—an inward and subtle impression made visible through divine blessing and protection (St. John Chrysostom 2011, 49). In this way, God's presence becomes a living proof of His mercy, spreading light and blessing over the faithful and providing security and peace amid trouble. Therefore, the 'face of God' symbolizes not only His divine display but also the manifestation of His love and mercy, imprinted on believers' hearts, spreading peace and joy.

Psalm 6 evocatively illustrates the relationship between man and God, emphasizing the importance of divine mercy in spiritual healing. The psalmist is in deep despair and suffering, feeling distant from God, which makes him believe he is nearing death. For him, this separation is the most painful part of his suffering and creates a strong urge to return and seek God's mercy. St. John Chrysostom interprets this as a spiritual struggle to reconnect with God and regain divine love and mercy (St. John Chrysostom 2011, 84). According to Didymus the Blind, the psalmist makes a twofold request: he asks God to turn His face toward him, symbolizing mercy, favour, and approval, and prays that he, too, will turn away from evil to restore lost fellowship ("Fragments on the Psalms," in PG 39, 1177 – Blaising 2004, 51). His separation from God, seen as the absence of His presence, becomes the source of all his suffering. This distance highlights his fear of death and despair, clearly showing the vital role of divine mercy in restoring inner harmony. Psalm 6 teaches us that closeness to God, expressed through sincere prayer and awareness of dependence on divine mercy, is the only way to overcome sorrow and find comfort during life's trials. In this inner struggle, divine mercy becomes the core motivation and driving force for restoring peace and hope.

Psalm 25 explicitly highlights the theme of divine mercy, using the words "turn your face towards me and be gracious to me" (v. 17), which suggests a dialogical and active relationship between God and the believer, where the request for mercy is not passive but involves active awareness and concern. In biblical language, "turning one's face away" symbolizes divine acceptance, favour, and goodwill, representing divine closeness and blessing. The psalmist, with his eyes continually fixed on God, subtly highlights the need to invite God to show His mercy and goodness, emphasizing the importance of a relationship founded on communion and mutual obedience. St. John Chrysostom interprets this request as a pedagogical act by God, who expects humans to seek Him with a sincere desire for mercy and acceptance. This act of returning is not just a prayer, but a display of a close relationship where both the divine and the human must actively participate. The Psalm emphasizes that divine mercy isn't automatically given but must be requested with faith and awareness, stemming from a living dialogue and a mindset of listening and recognizing human helplessness in the face of divine grace.

Psalm 27 reflects the psalmist's profound desire to be close to God, emphasizing essential aspects such as the 'face of God' and divine mercy. When faced with powerful enemies, the psalmist sees divine support as vital and regards closeness to God and seeing

His face (v. 7) as sources of reassurance. His heartfelt, sincere, and persistent prayer to be near God and to see His face reveals an intense longing for direct communion with the Creator. This longing not only relates to the physical realm but also symbolizes a spiritual need to be accepted in God's presence, thereby avoiding estrangement—something Rabbinic wisdom suggests leads to spiritual failures, including coldness, divine wrath, abandonment, and contempt (Rabinowitz 2005, 62). Bishop Gherasim Timuș identifies four stages of human decline caused by breaking the bond with God, which the psalmist desperately seeks to avoid:

> God hides His face when He ceases to spread the rays of His light; He is angry when He no longer speaks to the human heart; He forsakes him when He leaves him prey to passions; He despises and rejects him when He sees him no longer returning... (Timuș 1896, 318).

The distance from God, symbolized by His face being hidden, is linked to the loss of divine protection and the ensuing chaos in the world, prompting the psalmist to pray not to be forsaken by divine mercy constantly. Central to this prayer is an invocation of mercy, seen as a heartfelt, sincere, and profound request. The psalmist understands that when God reveals His face, His mercy is quickly manifested, rewarding prayers with divine responses. Conversely, when His face remains unseen, wickedness and trouble increase, and prayers go unanswered. In this inner struggle, the psalmist—according to Arnobius the Younger—compares his desire to be close to God to the love of a lover pleading for mercy and love, asking God not to turn away but to be merciful:

> In this place [the house of the Lord] [sub. ns.], the lover of God seeks no other happiness than the beauty of the Lord, using words similar to those lovers speak to their beloved: 'My heart says to your face, turn not your face from me, or cast away your servant in anger.' I have committed such sins that you have justly turned away your face from me, being angry at my passions; but be merciful, turn not away, and forsake me not, the God of my salvation. ("Commentary on the Psalms," in *CCL* 25, 34-35) (our translation).

Therefore, the 'face of God' symbolizes mutual closeness and nearness, with divine mercy forming the foundation of the psalmist's hope for salvation and communion. His heartfelt prayer, directed upward with sincere longing, reflects his conviction that only

divine mercy can provide safety and salvation, making this plea a core expression of his spiritual life (Kraus 1999, 514).

Psalm 30 illustrates the psalmist's state of confidence in his strength and steadfastness, which he sees as the result of divine health and radiance. However, this perspective is shattered with the turning away of God's face, an action that symbolizes the withdrawal of divine support due to his pride. The consequence is decline and approaching death, and the psalmist realizes that this separation from the divine face has removed him from goodness and protection. The deeper meaning of this experience is that, in the absence of divine mercy, the soul becomes weak, symbolizing an estrangement from God and spiritual beauty:

> As long as the rays of Thy watchfulness shone upon me, says David through St. Basil the Great voice, I lived in a good and untroubled state; but when Thou turned Thy face from me, my sinful and troubled state of soul was revealed. It is said that God turns his face away from us in times of hardship, when he leaves us to our trials, that the strength of the struggler may be made known. [...] And because turning is contrary to the will of God, and trouble is contrary to beauty and strength, it follows that trouble is ugliness and weakness of soul, born of alienation from God (St. Basil the Great 1986, 240) (our translation).

The psalmist expresses his hope that without God's mercy, he cannot rise from a state of fallenness and darkness. In this prayer, humility and the realization of his weakness become the reasons why God showers His mercy upon him, restoring him to the blessed path. Thus, God's face and his mercy are seen as essential for spiritual revival, and the turning of the divine face towards man becomes the symbol of divine love and compassion, which can transform suffering into joy.

In **Psalm 31**, the psalmist asks the Lord to show mercy, turn His face toward him, and restore him to the fellowship lost through sin. He understands that God looks with mercy on the humble, who fear Him and continually trust in divine deliverance. The psalmist emphasizes – according to St. Cyril of Alexandria – that the presence of God's face, also called His light, is the only deliverance from trouble:

> Shining shines the light of His deity, which Scripture calls the face of God, and all those who work that which is worthy of darkness flee. Therefore, the prophet also asks that he may receive it, not for his works, but for the mercy of God. For this [the revealing

> of the face of the Lord] [emphasis added] is the only way of deliverance [according to David] [emphasis added] (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1990, 125-6) (our translation).

In verses 20-21, the way this divine mercy concretely works is highlighted: God becomes a shield, a refuge, guarding those attacked by their enemies, hiding them in the vicinity of His face, in a sacred space where attacks from darkness are defeated by divine light. The psalmist compares this divine protection to mysterious and preventative actions, such as those in Scripture, where God guards His believers' unseen, rendering attacks futile and enemies unaware of the cause of their resistance. In this view, the presence of God's face, as a touch of His mercy, becomes the source of safety and deliverance. Thus, the 'face of God' symbolizes divine protection and merciful favour, silently bestowing tranquillity and justice on the humble and trusting. Throughout the Psalm, it underscores the belief that divine mercy is the only practical solution against attack and suffering and is a manifestation of God's unwavering love and protection of those who trust in Him (Hengstenberg 2010, 504).

Psalm 51 profoundly reflects the psalmist's need for mercy and divine intervention to restore communion with God, symbolized by the concept of the 'face of God.' The psalmist recognizes that his sins have created a barrier between himself and God, which is why he asks God to turn His face away from him to forgive him and free him from guilt. This request does not express a desire to be removed, but a plea for God not to hold his sins against him, but to look upon him with mercy. St. Augustine acknowledges that, for God not to remember or see sins, they must always be present in the conscience of the sinner, who must mourn and understand them deeply (St. Augustine 1997, 195). In this prayer, the psalmist also expresses his fear of a final separation from God, aware that the privilege of dwelling in the divine presence depends solely on His mercy. He knows that this presence, along with protection and consolation from the Holy Spirit, is essential to avoid ending up like those who have lost this communion. St. Cyril of Alexandria interprets the fact that the duration of this divine presence depends on divine mercy. The Psalm also reflects the universal human desire to recover a relationship broken by sin, asking for the Holy Spirit to be rekindled within the soul:

> For since the disobedience of Adam, as from the beginning of the human race, mankind has suffered God's withdrawal. They were taken out of paradise and became under the curse, the once blessed of God. When humanity grew into a multitude and sin reigned over all, the Spirit of God, which was given to us initially, departed from us, and

> the beauty of the image was marred. For God said to them all, 'My Spirit will not remain in these men, for they are flesh' (Phil. 6:3) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1991a, 59)

As a result, he requests two things at once: that the turning away from us may end and that the Holy Spirit may return to us. Therefore, the 'face' of God symbolizes divine mercy, compassion, and closeness; His throne remains open to the humble—those who acknowledge their sins and sincerely seek forgiveness, thereby enjoying communion with God, the only hope of salvation and spiritual renewal.

Psalm 67 expresses a collective prayer in which the psalmist asks for mercy and blessing for all people, emphasizing the importance of the 'face of God' and divine mercy. In this petition, the verb חָנַן is used differently from other Psalms, being expressed not in the imperative form but as an insistent desire to receive divine mercy (Tate 2002, 56). Most translations say, 'God have mercy on us,' suggesting an ongoing petition and the need to express divine love. An important point is the difference between οἰκτίρω (*to pity* or *have compassion*) and ἐλεέω (*to show mercy* or *kindness*), where the former expresses a specific request for a particular cause, and the latter asks for it generally. The Church Fathers also interpret this prayer in a Christological sense, seeing in it a foreshadowing of the blessing that Jesus Christ's coming would bring. They assert that this 'appearing of the face of God' symbolizes for believers the direct perception of divine presence, i.e., the Kingdom of heaven becoming accessible through Christ (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1991b: 60; Theodoret of Cyrus 2003, 192). Thus, the coming of Christ brings salvation for all nations, marking the moment when divine mercy illuminates the path to obedience and salvation. In conclusion, Psalm 66 highlights the merciful act of God, who, through the coming of Jesus, reveals His face to those who seek and believe in him, offering them peace and blessing. The face of God symbolizes both direct contemplation of divinity and the manifestation of his love and mercy, received with faith and piety by all who trust in God.

Psalm 119 deeply emphasizes the meaning of the 'face of God' and divine mercy in a believer's life. The psalmist offers a heartfelt prayer, earnestly asking God to turn His face toward him, to comfort and show him mercy. This 'beautification' of the divine face is seen as a plea for God's goodness and love, bringing comfort, peace, and forgiveness from sin (Allen 2002, 192). The prayer is offered from the whole being, from the depths of the heart, highlighting that this request is not superficial but an essential need for closeness and communion with God, represented by His face—the divine presence

seen as a light of mercy. The Fathers of the Church teach that, although God appears judgmental, He also responds with mercy to those who repent, receiving prayers from pure and humble hearts (Theodoret of Cyrus 2003, 377; Euthymios Zigabenos 2006, 563). In this prayer, the psalmist seeks not only mercy but also light in his life, as a sign of divine closeness and ongoing dialogue with the Creator—a process leading to true communion. Ultimately, this request reflects the belief that only in the presence of God's face, in the light of His mercy, can true peace, joy, and healing be found. The 'face of God' symbolizes not just a visible sign but the divine act by which love and mercy are poured out upon humankind, strengthening the bond of faith and love between God and believers.

Theological perspectives on the 'face of God' in the Psalms

The significance of God's face in receiving divine mercy is a key theme in the theology of the Psalms, highlighting the profound and essential connection between humans and the sacred. In three distinct Psalms, the plea for mercy is reinforced by the psalmist's appeal for God to turn His face toward him (Ps 25, 86, and 119). This detail underscores that divine mercy is not only a sign of kindness but also a result of a direct and personal encounter with God, through which genuine communion is built. In the spiritual and cultural setting of the Old Testament, turning one's face indicated giving special attention and showing acceptance or approval. Therefore, God's face became a symbol of divine blessing and goodwill. If God chose not to turn His face away, the psalmist's prayers would remain unanswered, and deliverance would be delayed, as clearly shown in Psalms 31 and 56. Without God's face, cries for mercy were met with silence and anxiety, depicting feelings of abandonment and absence of divine aid. The desperate effort to gain God's mercy and attention is stressed in Psalm 25, where the psalmist persistently fixes his gaze on the Lord, hoping that his perseverance will eventually bring the blessing of God's merciful gaze. Prayer, therefore, becomes an act of profound hope and trust, proof of a personal covenant and a relationship that goes beyond merely asking for mercy.

To facilitate this divine encounter, the psalmist pleads with God not to focus on his sins but to turn His face toward him, as highlighted in Psalm 51. This plea is not an invitation for God to remove or overlook suffering but rather a plea for a gaze that looks beyond the sins that separate man and divinity, thus hindering access to mercy and forgiveness. The idea of God's face turning is vital for the psalmist, seen as a clear sign

that his request has been heard and that he is about to re-enter a state of communion with the divine. This communion is where he can feel and experience God's ongoing presence, where righteousness and divine grace make it possible to see God's face without obstacles or barriers.

The Psalms thus highlight another aspect of spiritual life: it is not enough to ask for divine help; it is necessary to create the right conditions for this intervention to be possible. This includes admitting sins, repenting, and sincerely wanting to restore the bond broken by thoughts or actions that have alienated man from God. In these situations, the Lord's face becomes not only a metaphor for divine presence but also a sign of the psalmist's spiritual state. The true goal of this spiritual dialogue is a genuine communion, where the psalmist not only asks for help but also actively receives and responds to divine presence and guidance.

The Psalms reveal that despite hardships and feelings of abandonment, hope persists when one turns to God and has a sincere desire for reconciliation. These writings encourage believers to pursue this communion not only in times of need but also as a continual practice in their spiritual life, for only in this way can they live in harmony with God's will and fully experience His mercy. The psalmist teaches that while sins can create obstacles between man and God, they are not insurmountable barriers but instead call to repentance, acknowledgment of one's faults, and a genuine desire to be shown mercy. The importance of seeking the Lord's face is not limited to outward appearances or benign manifestations of divinity but also signifies a profound change in the spiritual state of the one who seeks. The divine face turning toward the psalmist is not just a one-time act but a sign that the personal connection with God can be renewed through sincere prayer and genuine repentance at any moment. This divine renewal strengthens the believer, giving them courage to continue seeking, repenting, and transforming their life, assuring them that divine mercy is always accessible to those who turn to Him in faith.

Besides its theological and psychological importance, this need to see the face of the Lord in prayer also offered practical lessons for believers: that prayer should not just be a cry of desperation, but also a sign of faith in divine goodness and mercy. It reflects an attitude of humility and acknowledgment of sins, as well as hope that God, in his mercy, will look kindly and respond to requests for forgiveness and healing. In this way, prayer becomes a bridge between man and God—a means of communication where the believer expresses a desire to be in communion, to see the divine face, and to be

comforted by His presence. Only through this genuine and direct relationship can the believer recognize his sins, hope for forgiveness and acceptance, and ultimately receive divine mercy that restores and renews him spiritually.

Additionally, the need to seek God's favour and bring the heart closer to Him also teaches an important lesson about inner transformation. The psalmist recognizes that for God to turn His face toward him, he must correct his ways, sincerely repent, and cleanse his soul of sins. In this context, the request to be looked upon with mercy becomes an act of self-awareness, understanding that sins not only hinder the relationship with God but also corrupt the soul and damage the inner life of the believer.

In conclusion, the theme of God's face turning as a sign of mercy and restoring communion resonates deeply with the human quest for meaning, redemption, and divine love. The psalmist shows us that this close relationship must be nurtured through repentance, patience, and faith, and divine mercy will always be available to those who sincerely ask, let go of sins and hesitations, and approach God with an open heart. It is an ongoing process, a heartfelt dialogue where acknowledging sins and helplessness marks the start of mercy, and when divine gaze is returned, it brings not only answers to prayer but also a profound transformation—a change of the soul in the light of divine grace. In this way, faith becomes more than an outward act; it becomes an authentic and intense experience of a relationship with God, where humility and hope come together to draw man back into God's presence. Therefore, this prayer for the return of the Lord's face teaches spiritual delicacy and inner honesty: only by recognizing one's sins, remaining patient through trials, and trusting that divine mercy will be given can man regain the joy of communion and see God's face.

This remains a universal theme, relevant always and for every believer, because it reflects our deep desire to be in harmony with the divine, to experience His unconditional love, and to live in the light of His grace. Essentially, the turning of the Lord's face is not just a separate prayer but a symbol of our entire spiritual journey: to approach God with humility, to allow His light to illuminate our souls, and to live in genuine, deep communion with the One who created us and loves us endlessly.

Conclusions

In the Psalms, the theme of 'turning of the face' toward the believer primarily represents the presence and divine mercy that are essential for the soul's peace and spiritual fulfilment. The psalmist, whether in petition or penitential prayer, as well as in

praise, seeks this return of the divine to find peace and security amid dangers, showing that only this return from God's merciful side can guarantee deliverance and proper protection.

The idea of seeing him and having the Lord's face turned toward man is more about a spiritual state of divine communion, acceptance, and reconciliation than a literal visual perception. This state of communion, symbolized by the divine gaze, provides believers with security and hope—hope that God's mercy, revealed in His face, will become meaningful to those who are sincere, humble, and engaged in a relationship of mutual love and trust.

Thus, in the Psalms, God's face becomes not only a symbol of divine presence and love but also a testament that His mercy and blessings are not accessible to those who do not sincerely and humbly seek this closeness. When God turns His face toward the supplicant, it is a sign of mercy, an opportunity to be looked upon with love and to receive protection amid life's trials, an invitation to live in peace and divine joy. In this way, the Psalms teach us that the relationship with God, symbolized by the divine gaze and face, becomes a central aspect of religious experience, always representing the hope of ongoing divine mercy and love in the believer's life.

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The Veil on Moses' Face, a Characteristic Feature of Mosaic Revelation

Abstract

This study examines the significance of the veil worn by Moses as a distinctive feature of the Mosaic revelation during his encounters with the divine. The veil, which covered Moses' radiant face, symbolizes both the fear and respect that the people of Israel had for the direct manifestation of God's glory, as well as the limitations of human understanding regarding God's goodness and greatness. Moses used the veil to shield the people from the brightness of his face—and, implicitly, from the divine glory itself. This action can be interpreted as a gesture of humility and care for the people's inability to perceive and fully comprehend that radiance. Additionally, the veil serves as a metaphor for the duality of divine communication—simultaneously concealing and revealing God's will. This duality reflects the complexity of the relationship between God and humanity in terms of revelation and concealment. Etymologically, the Hebrew term מַסְוֶה appears only in the context of Moses' veil, emphasizing its uniqueness and significance within the biblical narrative. Moses also plays a vital role as a symbolic mediator between the sacred and the profane. Through his veil, he acts as an intermediary, establishing the covenant with God while providing both a threshold for accessibility and a protective barrier. In rabbinic and patristic literature, Moses' veil is reinterpreted from a hermeneutical and soteriological perspective. Here, the themes of salvation and knowledge of God are conveyed through a symbolic and prophetic understanding of sacred texts, paving the way for subsequent teachings and revelations. Overall, this study highlights the complexity of the natural and supernatural in the Old Testament narrative through the lens of a physical veil. It serves as a precursor to the theological iconostasis, bridging the past and the future in an ongoing search for the divine.

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Veil, Moses, Revelation, Divine Glory, Mediator

Introduction

The veil covering the face of the great lawgiver can be seen as a "characteristic feature of Moses" (Hochstein 2021, 3). Moses served as the vessel through which God delivered His Word, first inscribed in stone at Sinai, and later preparing, "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), for the Incarnation of the Logos. This veil was meant to shield the brightness of Moses' face, which, on one hand, instilled fear in the Israelites and, on the other hand, reflected the glory of God that remained visible on him.

To alleviate the people's fear, Moses took a "simple and logical" approach: he covered his face. Even though it was the Israelites who were afraid, it was Moses who chose to veil himself, understanding that to "be with the people," he needed to "hide" and wear a "mask," all due to their vulnerability (Hochstein 2021, 2).

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai again with new tablets of the Law, he was unaware of the additional presence he bore that immediately struck fear in others. Like a mother soothing a frightened child, Moses had to gather the people around him, encouraging them to approach the divine glory rather than flee from it (Johnston 2022). Moses did not exploit the fear of the people; he neither turned it into an opportunity nor abused his authority (Marzouk 2025). Despite being "humble and timid," Moses felt "embarrassed." To avoid being seen, he wore a veil, which functioned like a "mask." This action provides us with a fascinating insight into Moses's psyche. Faced with the fear of his peers, he chose not to take advantage of it to enhance his authority. Instead, he felt "embarrassed and burdened with shame," ultimately deciding to "hide" what was frightening and "cover" himself (Hochstein 2021, 4).

The display of divine glory through Moses's shining face represented "the goodness of God," while the veil symbolized humanity's inability to comprehend that goodness. To "be part of the covenant is to know God," so covering this glory with a veil indicated that the Israelites failed to understand the core of the covenant—the knowledge of God (Philpot 2013b, 113). Thus, on one hand, "the veil was meant to mask the divine light so that it would not be wasted." On the other hand, men could perceive the brightness itself. It served as "an optical and tangible confirmation"[1] of the Word of God, which was proclaimed to them and could be seen in the "brightness on the face of Moses" (Haran 1988, 162).

There are several reasons why Moses wears a veil. Firstly, Moses is concerned about alleviating the people's fear. His humble nature also plays a role; he does not want to be viewed as "the voice of YHWH" when he is not preaching divine teachings,

especially in the intimate moments of daily life. Secondly, regarding God, the veil serves a dual purpose: it both conceals and reveals divine glory. In a proper exegetical context, the significance of the veil is profound. It acts as a "symbol – pivot – around which other themes revolve, and its interpretation serves as a hermeneutic principle for other Old Testament themes" (Lazarus 2024, 77).

The Meaning of the Veil on Moses' Face (Etymological Perspective)

In modern Romanian translations, the term "veil"[2] can be found in the Book of Genesis, where it appears in three[3] instances (Gn 24:65; 38:14,19). In these passages, Rebekah and Tamar use veils to cover and wrap themselves, which conveys the meaning of a shawl. The Hebrew term used is צָעִיף (translated as *θέριστρον* in the LXX, although it is omitted in 38:19). This term refers to a type of clothing, specifically a veil or shawl, that women traditionally wore in ancient Hebrew culture. This garment covered women's heads, shoulders, and faces, often signifying modesty or serving as a cultural expression of femininity and social status.

Additionally, three other Hebrew terms carry a similar meaning. The term צַמָּה appears four times and designates the wedding veil worn by the bride (Sg 4:1, 3; 6:7) and the veil worn by the "Daughter of Babylon" (Is 47:2); in the LXX, it is translated as *κατακάλυμμά*, the plural form of the noun *κατακάλυμμα*, meaning "covering," "veil," or "curtain." The term רְדִיד, appearing twice, refers to the house shawls worn by the "daughters of Zion" (Is 3:22, which is verse 23 in the TM) and the shawl worn by the beloved woman in the Song of Solomon (Sg 5:7). In the LXX, this is translated as *ἐπιβλήματα*, the plural form of the noun *ἐπίβλημα*, which translates to "cloak," "negligee," "a piece of clothing," or "house coat." Lastly, it is also associated with the light covering used in summer. The term רַעֲלָה, translated by Bartolomue Valeriu Anania as "the necks of the glorious proud" and rendered in the LXX as *τὸν κόσμον τοῦ προσώπου αὐτῶν*, appears only once in the context of the ornaments worn by the "daughters of Zion" (Is 3:19).

None of the four Hebrew terms mentioned is found in Exodus 34:33-35. During this event, the term מַסְוֶה is specifically used[4], appearing only three times in this episode. It refers exclusively to a covering worn by a man (Hamilton 2011, 588). Moses, in this context, wears a different veil (מַסְוֶה) to cover his shining face after having spoken with God. After leaving Sinai, there are no further references to this veil over the next 40 years. Neither Moses nor anyone else from that time in the

Old Testament is described as wearing such a veil again. The veil (מַסְוֶה), which prevented others from looking at Moses, seems to be ultimately replaced by the veil (פָּרֹכֶת) that separated the Holy from the Holy of Holies, ensuring that the people would not gaze upon the Holy One (Hamilton 2011, 589).

Interestingly, the most used Hebrew term for the veil is פָּרֹכֶת, which appears 25 times exclusively in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and 2 Chronicles. This term originates from the verb פָּרַךְ, meaning "to break" or "to separate." In the Septuagint (LXX), it is translated as *καταπέτασμα*. It refers to the curtain made of thin linen and dyed blue, purple, and scarlet threads, with woven cherubim (see Ex 26:31). This curtain was used in both the Holy Tabernacle and the Temple to separate the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. It symbolizes a physical barrier between the holiness of God and the sinful state of humanity, as well as a boundary between the divine and human realms. Only the high priest could pass through this veil once a year on the Day of Atonement to offer sacrifices for the sins of all the people (Lv 16:2-34). The veil also serves as a "meeting place between the two parts of the Covenant" (Eerdmans 1987, 1036).

In the New Testament, this term refers to the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place as well (Mt 27:51). When the Israelite camp moved, the Tabernacle was dismantled, and the "veil that covered" (פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ) the "ark of testimony" was also "veiled" (Nm 4:5). Interestingly, the same term is also used to refer to another curtain at the entrance to the Holy Tabernacle (Ex 26:37). In this context, Moses can be viewed as a "walking Tabernacle," which both "manifests and yet hides the splendor of Jehovah" (Propp 2006, 621).

The Function of the Veil on Moses' Face

The function of the veil has three critical points worth considering understanding its meaning. Firstly, the term מַסְוֶה translates to "cloak" or "robe," though its rare usage makes this interpretation difficult to argue effectively. Secondly, any translation other than "veil"[5] or "scarf" is challenging to conceive, as the purpose of the veil was to "hide the image of Moses." Thirdly, the text indicates that Moses used the veil in response to the people's reaction upon seeing his shining face (Philpot 2013b, 93-94).

Moses "returns" to the people, who cannot bear the brightness of his face, as he "irradiates the divine light." He covers his face "to make the overwhelming rays of the divine light more bearable," acknowledging that they are not spiritually prepared

for such intensity (Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 369). By placing a covering over his radiant face, Moses dims the overwhelming power of the light, allowing the people to tolerate it, as they are not spiritually ready for such a profound divine communication (Stăniloae 1992, 369). Therefore, Moses "profitably" covered his face, as "the law has a shadow or thickness to its letter." From a spiritual perspective, this covering must eventually be removed, a process that will be fully realized when we stand before God and "see the glory of Moses without the shadow, understanding the law in a spiritual sense" (Cyril of Alexandria, 1992, 370).

The function of the veil worn by Moses is relatively straightforward. It was used in response to the fear of the Israelites (Ex 34:30) and served to hide his face when he was not acting as an intercessor. The text indicates that the people were not prevented from seeing Moses' shining face—the radiant goodness of YHWH Himself—if he communicated the divine word to them. Moses wore the veil only when he was not conveying the word of Jehovah, which meant he was acting as an ordinary Israelite for personal reasons, without his role as a mediator. Therefore, it is evident that the shining face of Moses, which signifies the presence of Jehovah, not the veil, is the primary focus of this episode (Ex 34:29-35) (Philpot 2013b, 94-95, 101).

Did Moses teach with his face covered by a veil?

This passage is often misunderstood due to the similarity between the veil that Moses wore and a wedding veil, which conceals a bride's face. Because of this resemblance, some assumed that Moses hid his face to indicate divine holiness after his encounters with God (Wines 2019). It has been suggested that "Moses wore this covering constantly, except at times when he entered the Tabernacle to speak with God" (Morgenstern 1925, 1). Transfigured by his close relationship with God, Moses, upon returning to the people, needed to "create a veil so that he could continue his work before them without causing fear." The veil served as a visible and concrete symbol of Mosaic authority. Moses wore the veil when addressing the people, "for his face shone with transfiguration due to the presence of God" (Coats 1988, 131, 138).

In patristic literature, the idea is also present that this veil was necessary when he preached, as "according to Jewish understanding, not even the light of the law could be fully comprehended" (Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 369).

> As Moses entered into a more intimate communion with men, he showed them the destination he intended to lead them toward. After that, when he was speaking solely through the law, he again put on his veil. It was only when he engaged in more intimate communication with God that he lifted the covering and entered back into loving communication (Stăniloae 1992, 369).

Proposing a different approach to understanding the episode, Rashi emphasizes that the Israelites could not even bear to look at Moses' face. He believes this reaction was a result of sin, stating, "the power of sin is great." Before they engaged with idolatry, they were not afraid of the divine glory on the mountaintop, described as a "consuming fire" (Ex 24:17). However, after the incident with the golden calf, "fear will seize them." They will "tremble at the mere sight of the rays of light coming from Moses" (Rashi 1950, 436-7). Consequently, the people can never return to the exact spiritual state they were in before. Sin "affected" them, "vitiated them," and their descent compromised their spiritual refinement into idolatry. Moving forward, the people will "have to work hard to regain their spiritual level" (Israel 2019).

It should be noted that Moses did not wear the veil for his own "comfort," nor did he need it to protect himself from God or reflected glory. He did not wear a veil around the divine presence, on Mount Sinai, or at the Tabernacle. Instead, he covered his face "for the sake of the people," not because his unveiled face would physically harm them, but because he frightened the Israelites so much that they no longer dared to approach him (Stuart 2006, 739).

Those who have examined the biblical text observe that verses 29-33 depict Moses with a shining face, which instills fear in the people. Some believe that the Israelites would only approach Moses to hear his teachings after he covered his face with a veil. When he finished speaking, he would then remove the veil. Verses 34-35 indicate that each time Moses entered the presence of God to receive His words, he took off his veil. When he left to convey those words to the people, he wore the veil until he returned to the Lord. The phrase "lifted his veil until (עַד) when he went out" refers to the conclusion of verse 35, which states, "and when he went out, he told the children of Israel what the Lord had commanded him." This implies that Moses donned his veil upon exiting the Tabernacle, thus speaking to the people with his face covered.

The Apostle Paul offers a Christian interpretation of the veil of Moses, suggesting that the Israelites were unable to fix their eyes on Moses' face because of its glory.

Consequently, Moses covered his face with a veil, which symbolizes their confused minds and hearts. According to Paul, when reading the Old Testament, their understanding remains obscured by the same veil. He sees the veil as a representation of the spiritual meanings of the Old Testament, which become clear only through Christ. This interpretation was later echoed by Origen, who linked the veil as a symbol of Old Testament mysteries with the idea of returning to the Lord as a means of lifting the veil.

There is an interpretation that the glory on Moses' face needed to be covered, not because it would have harmed the Israelites, but because it was temporary, it was "only for the moment." Eternal life, according to this view, would be found on another face. The glory on Moses' face eventually faded ("withered away," as noted in 2 Cor 3:7), but whenever he communicated with God, the brightness would be restored. When he came out again to speak to the people (cf. Spurgeon 1890, 254), that brightness would shine forth. However, eventually, there would come a day when, alongside Moses, the people of God would see His face (Johnston 2022). The veil that Moses wore prevented the Israelites from witnessing the glory of the Old Testament, which was fading. God did not want the Israelites to see this fading glory, as it might lead them to "lose faith in Moses" (Guzik 2019, 304).

The Apostle Paul's interpretation of the veil in 2 Cor 3:7-18 presents some challenges. He states that Moses covered his face so that the Israelites would not see the brightness fading. According to Paul, Moses had no valid reason for this action. He suggests that this move, which may seem arbitrary, shifts the focus of the veil from Moses' face to the hearts of his opponents, representing their inability to understand the Torah. This barrier can only be removed in Christ. While the book of Exodus suggests that the veil served as a practical measure to alleviate the discomfort that people experienced when looking at Moses' shining face, Paul interprets these actions from a Christian perspective, considering them "absurd from the point of view of what Moses says" (Garrett 2010, 729-30). The apostle Paul explains that Moses wore a veil over his shining face until he went in to speak with God. Similarly, Christians can "approach the glory of God with unveiled faces and experience the same transformation." This contrasts with the unbelieving Israelites, who "have a veil that covers their hearts" (2 Cor 3:15). In contrast, Christians have had their veil removed (2 Cor 3:16), allowing them to "endure the bold and direct revelation of the glory of God because their hearts have been changed" (Garland 1999, 198).

Moses taught with his face uncovered (without a veil)

If verse 29 describes Moses coming down from the mountain with the tablets of the law in his hands, and unaware that his face was shining, the following verse illustrates the fear of Aaron and the elders of Israel as they approach him because of this. The text does not indicate that Moses puts on a veil; instead, it states that he calls them and communicates the divine commandments without covering his face. Only after he finishes conveying the message does he cover his face (Ex 34:33).

By considering the semantic structure of the following verses, we can clarify their meaning. For example, if we maintain the current division into verses, we have: "And when Moses came in before the Lord to speak to him, he lifted his veil until he went out; and when he went out he told the children of Israel what the Lord had commanded him" (Ex 34:34). This suggests that Moses put on his veil immediately after leaving the Tabernacle, which is how he addressed the people. However, we can interpret this semantic construction differently by dividing verse 34 into two distinct ideas: "And when Moses went in before the Lord to speak to him, he lifted his veil until he went out" (Ex 34:34) relates to his interaction with God. The following verses, 34-35, describe the interaction between Moses and the people: "And when he went out, he said to the children of Israel what the Lord had commanded him, and the children of Israel saw that Moses' face was full of glory." This interpretation suggests that Moses kept his veil raised, as the Israelites could see his face shining. He maintained the lifted veil until he completed communicating the divine words, and only then did he lower it. The same idea is expressed at the end of verse 35 about the biblical episode: "And Moses put the veil on his face again, until he came in to speak to Him (the Lord)" (Ex 34:35). This signifies that Moses covered his face with a veil only after he finished conveying the divine will.

It can be observed that this descent from the mountain parallels other exits from the Tabernacle. Just as Moses covered his face with a veil when he descended from the mountain—having communicated the divine words to the people—he would follow the same practice in later encounters with God in the Tabernacle. Thus, the Tabernacle serves as "a portable reflection of Mount Sinai." The rules to be followed descending from the mountain mirror those that apply after leaving the Tabernacle. The key difference is that while Moses was initially unaware of the radiance of his face when he came down from the mountain, he later became conscious of this aspect, which he had to embrace (Haran 1984, 162) permanently.

After fulfilling his "public and official role," Moses hid the dazzling brightness of his face," not only out of 'modesty' but also to delineate the distinction between his role as a divine servant, the "prime minister of the old covenant," and his private life. The veil serves a pedagogical purpose; it acts as "spiritual preparation," as it teaches the people about divine providence, which "adapts" to their "spiritual weakness." The veil allowed only a limited amount of brilliance to shine through, providing the people with "foresight and proof" of what was to come (Murphy 1866, 345). The veil was worn for two reasons: first, in response to the fear of the Israelites, and second, to cover Moses' face when he was not acting as a mediator between God and the people. The biblical text suggests that the people were not prevented from seeing the shining face of Moses—symbolizing the radiant goodness of Jehovah—whenever he revealed the divine message (Philpot 2013a, 10).

Moses covered his face because he felt embarrassed when people looked at him with their mouths agape at the brightness of his face. However, whenever he received instructions from God, he was asked to remove the veil (Luntschitz, 2009). The wise leaders of the Israelites believed that someone who was shameful could not teach others[6]. Naphtali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) noted that when Moses spoke to God, he would completely remove the veil. Before going out to the people, he would place the veil on his head, tilted upward, so that while delivering the laws, they could still see his face. After he finished speaking, he would then lower the veil over his face (Hochstein 2021, 4-5).

Through speech, Moses removes his veil and overcomes the moment when the people were "afraid to approach" him, allowing them to return to him. While the process of revelation can sometimes hinder connection — as the brightness and covering of Moses' face make encounters difficult — he uses discourse to "meet" and "reveal" himself, ultimately unveiling God's presence. Through "speech" and "dialogue," an "opportunity for encounter" is created, serving as a "a small step toward imitating God and walking in His ways," which helps alleviate fear (Hochstein 2021, 5-6). When Moses addressed the people in God's name, he would remove his veil, allowing the brightness of God to shine through him. However, once he finished speaking, he would return to his private life, covering his face so that no one would feel the need to keep their distance. Although God honored him greatly, Moses did not wish to flaunt this honor or be seen by others; thus, he covered his face in ordinary conversation with people and revealed it only when he spoke to the Lord and in His name (Spurgeon 1890, 254).

Moses stood before God without a veil, just as he preached to the people. However, when he wasn't preaching, he covered his face with a veil. We can thus infer that for the remainder of his life, Moses would cover his face unless he was communicating with God or conveying a message about God to Israel (Propp 2006, 618). Moses acted as the mediator of divine law, and after delivering that law, he would cover his face again with a veil (Dozeman 2000, 21). When he returned from the Mount, it marked the beginning of a new phase and a change in his state of being (Haran 1984, 160).

The veil served as a means for Moses to cover his face whenever he was not in dialogue with God or with the people. It was a practical solution that Moses employed throughout his prophetic ministry; however, it was not used during his encounters with the Lord or when he conveyed divine messages to the people. Moses removed his veil when speaking to God, which caused his face to shine or his skin to harden. He also took off the veil when addressing the people, as his authority stemmed from his encounters with the divine. This authority relied on clear and transparent communication with the people, who might be frightened by his illuminated face, but needed to hear him speak clearly and not from behind a veil (Marzouk 2025).

When Moses was not speaking to God or communicating with the people on God's behalf, he would cover his extraordinary appearance as a form of self-humiliation. This veil limited his authority to that of a mediator. Additionally, the periodic covering of Moses' face reflects the Israelites' fluctuating experience of divine presence and absence. When Moses' face was uncovered, it allowed the people to see the reflected glory of the Lord. However, after explaining the law, Moses covered his face, concealing the glory of the Lord from the Israelites because the old law obscured God's presence. The Mosaic Law was not intended to save anyone, as it ultimately had an end; this "passing of the law" would eventually be replaced by the glory of the Lord, which was hidden from Israel (Garrett 2020, 2504).

While the biblical narrative primarily highlights the light radiating from Moses' face rather than the veil itself, the mentions of Moses putting on or taking off the veil suggest an oral tradition that remains somewhat unclear in its written form (Usca 2002, 162). It is also essential to note that Moses wore the veil only when he was not engaged in a prophetic mission. Therefore, the key focus of this episode is the brilliance of Moses' face rather than the veil that concealed it (Haran 1988, 163).

The veil can be understood as a separation between what is holy and what is not. It is suggested that Moses used it to "separate his life." Sacred things are made

"revealed, naturally," making the conversation with God and the teaching of the people seem like "natural processes" for Moses. In contrast, the "mundane" activities of life—such as eating or discussing household chores—should be done with his face covered. From this perspective, the veil was not intended to stand between Moses and the people[7], but rather between Moses' piety and his humanity (Israel 2019).

The notion that Moses wore his veil only when he was not acting as an intermediary between God and the people is also present in rabbinic literature. Don Isaac Abrabanel (Abravanel or Rabbi Itzhak ben Yehuda Abrabanel), a Portuguese Jewish politician, banker, scholar, philosopher, rabbi, and exegete, believed that Moses "should not use this divine light when he ate, drank, and slept, or when he talked to his wife and family about matters unrelated to the Torah" (Israel 2019).

Another possible explanation for the role of the veil involves the brilliance of the Torah manuscript. Rabbi Judah ben Nahman, speaking on behalf of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, stated that Moses, "by passing over his head the pen with which he wrote the Torah," was left with "a little ink," which "was responsible for the bright rays" (Midrash Rabbah 1939, 542). The "parable of the drops of ink" suggests that the law, or the Torah itself, was responsible for this radiant effect. Since "Moses is the embodiment of the Torah," his shining face reflects this connection (Israel 2019). Building on this idea, Ibn Ezra argues that Moses' brilliance was "recharged" each time he received a new law from God. Therefore, the brightness of Moses' face can be seen as "a reflection of the brightness of the Torah." It has been proposed that Moses' face shone only "as long as the Torah was given" and that this miraculous phenomenon may have ceased when they left Mount Sinai (Ibn Ezra 1996, 728).

Conclusions

The biblical episode can be viewed as a "veiled revelation," which signifies "the revelation of an infinite fullness, inexpressible in words." In this context, God reveals His will while also concealing Himself. These two divine actions—revelation and concealment—illustrate the idea that one cannot fully encounter God by discarding created symbols; instead, we must experience them as symbols, acting as mirrors of the invisible. God's presence is experienced "only in and through created symbols," which are accessible only through the coverings that conceal Him. This highlights the dual nature of the symbolic, where concealment and revelation co-occur, or where revelation is achieved through concealment (Constas 2017, 317-8). The mystery is unveiled

both through the "language" that allows the transcendent to communicate with the sublunary realm and through "the veil" that not only hides but also adorns the invisible. To comprehend this, individuals must "transform their senses" to "read this veil," not by engaging with it directly or entirely, but by recognizing it as a trace of an ineffable presence (Tofan 2024, 14).

As Andrei Scrima[8] noted, "God shines through rather than appears." This suggests that the mystery, the veil that covers and through which the divine presence can be perceived, does not set limits for those who seek it. Instead, it acts as a medium that captivates and guides us. The mystery must be traversed, not to be exhausted, but to help direct our gaze and lift our souls from the opaque forms of the world. It "urges us on the journey" and becomes "the breathable air of life, the source where we find our freshness and strength" (Tofan 2024, 12).

To understand and follow the divine message, we must walk "the hidden path that leads to mystical places, beyond the iconostasis of the altar, over the stumbling blocks, to the cornerstone." However, to "reach the threshold of the door of the Pantocrator," one must climb the "steps of Sinai" (Constas 2017, 11-2).

Like the iconostasis, which represents the veil through which the divine presence shines, sacred texts should also be viewed as a space of "seduction." In this context, a person allows themselves to be captivated, follows the divine, and is enveloped by the light that emanates from it (Tofan 2024, 13-4). Just as the physical brilliance reflects Moses' encounter with God's glory, prayer serves as the means through which humanity communicates with the divine. It is through prayer that we draw closer to God, providing us the chance to encounter[9] the Creator, who welcomes us into His home and transforms us into light[10].

To live by the "spirit" of Scripture, the Church Fathers and Church Writers suggest that prayer is a vital key (hermeneutical method) for understanding the written Word. While the message of Scripture can be viewed as a "lesson" whose meaning needs to be explored, it is essential to note that "idle and self-absorbed" souls may feel "discouraged" and "disgusted," whereas "zealous and free souls" will be "stimulated." Understanding the "holy letters" requires more than just knowing how to read or merely studying; we must also ask the Lord to open the Scriptures, referred to as the "sealed book" (Jr 32:10-11). When we do this, it will inflame our hearts, enabling us to achieve a deeper and more spiritual understanding. If we fail to go beyond this initial level, we risk experiencing the "slavery of the veil," where a veil covers our "heart"

(Origen 1981, 114, 119-121) and obstructs our connection with God, the source of wisdom. Therefore, it is essential to pray with great perseverance—sometimes for "whole days"—so that the Lord "will remove the veil from the eyes of our hearts" (Simeon the New Theologian 2001, 317).

To understand God, even if only "symbolically" and "as much as it is possible for us," the divine light has been "enveloped in various holy coverings." This is necessary because it must be "accommodated, through parental providence, in a way that is appropriate to our nature." We can know God only through the "holy curtains" that conceal the spiritual from the sensible and the higher being from those enveloped in forms and images. Our understanding is limited, as we can only grasp God's essence "mysteriously" and according to our own "measure." In revealing Himself to humanity, "the unspeakable has been intertwined with the word." The veil is essential for us, as theology (the study of God) is "double: one aspect is unspeakable and mysterious, while the other is more clearly revealed." One aspect is "symbolic and manifested in sanctifying acts," and the other appeals to the love of wisdom and proof. The former connects truth with what has been said, while the latter acts and elevates us towards God through divine initiations. This is how we should perceive theological or biblical symbols: as "curtains" that allow us glimpses of God (Dionysius 1996, 15, 137, 266).

The entire Old Testament contains clues that must be understood in terms of their typical meanings, symbols, and messianic prophecies. This is the direction indicated by the Savior, as reflected in His words: "... It is the Scriptures [...] that testify of Me" (Jn 5:39). The Apostles followed this path, noting that "the law was given to us as a guide/teacher to Christ" (Gal 3:24). This understanding was further developed by the Church Fathers and Church Writers. Blessed Augustine succinctly expressed the interdependence of the two Testaments[11], stating that "the justice of God," which is "hidden in the Old Testament," is "revealed" in the New Testament[12]. He also noted that "divine grace," which was concealed in the Old Testament, is made manifest in the Gospel of Christ[13].

Therefore, the veil of Moses extends beyond a merely Mosaic perspective and must be understood within a unified biblical context. This context provides a soteriological framework that explains why God chose to reveal Himself in this manner, both unveiling and concealing His divine essence simultaneously.

To avoid misinterpreting or straying from the divine Word, which is often difficult to understand (2 Pt 3:16), we must steer clear of obscuring the profound truths that it

holds. Otherwise, "everything that is understood changes into even greater meanings." It is wise to embrace the sentiment of Lucian Blaga in his confession: "I do not crush the corolla of wonders of the world, and I do not kill with my mind the mysteries that I encounter on my path" (Blaga 1919, 5-6).

In God's loving relationship with humanity, the Creator does not place a veil or barrier between Himself and people. Instead, it is humanity that can choose to create veils in our relationships with God and one another. In the pursuit of knowledge, as humanity reaches upward towards God, such a veil is necessary to help us perceive the divine that transcends earthly things.

Notes

[1] Moses had to wear a "mahrama on his face" to make the divine glory "tangible" (Maxwell 2007, 60).

[2] The early Romanian translations of the Bible used the term "brobodelnic," derived from "broboadă," which means "fairy tale, handkerchief, scarf." This term appears three times in MS 45 (Romanian Manuscript 45 from the Library of the Cluj Branch of the Romanian Academy, which contains a revised copy of Nicolae Miscu's translation of the Old Testament) and in the 1688 Bible. The term "brobodealnic" was used twice in the Blaj Bible, which prefers the term "garment" in Ex 24:65 but uses "brobodealnic" in Ex 38:14 and 38:19. In MS 4389 (Romanian Manuscript 4389 from the Library of the Romanian Academy, likely written by Daniil Andrean the Pannonian as a second seventeenth-century translation of the Old Testament), three different terms appear in the relevant scripture references: "stuffing" (a garment for covering the head, a cloth, a fray, or a covering) in Ex 24:65; "beautiful clothes" in Exodus 38:14; and "clothes of adornment" in Ex 38:19 (cf. MLD I 2004, 232-233, 277-278). The Radu & Galaction Bible, the Synodal Edition, and the Ananias Orthodoxy consistently use the term "veil" in all three passages.

[3] In the Synodal translation, which follows the model of the Vulgate that uses the term "velamen oculorum," the word "veil" appears in Gn 20:16. In this verse, Abimelech addresses Sarrah, saying, "Behold, I give to your brother a thousand shekels of silver, which will serve as a veil over your eyes to those around you and the whole world. And behold, now you are counted righteous!" Here, the term translated as "veil" corresponds to the Hebrew word כְּסוּת, meaning "covering." This term also relates to other uses in the Bible, such as "garment" (found in Ex 21:10 and Dt 22:12), which indicates a covering (see Ex 22:27). The word appears eight times in the Old Testament, with four of those occurrences in the Pentateuch.

[4] In the LXX, the term is translated as *κάλυμμα* (with seven occurrences in the book of Exodus, of which the three in Ex 34 are translations of the Hebrew term מַסְוֶה, and the other four (Ex 27:16; 35:11; 39:34 and 40:5) translate מָסָךְ. The Greek term is also used in 2 Cor 3:13-16 to describe the veil on Moses' face and metaphorically to describe the spiritual veil on the hearts of the Israelites. The term *κατακαλύπτω* appears only three times and is used exclusively in 1 Cor 11:6-7, referring to the practice of women covering their heads in prayer. The Hebrew term מָסָךְ has 22 occurrences, all in the books of Exodus and Numbers, with the meanings of "screen, curtain, shield, barrier, curtain, partition wall, veil, fabric, cloth, material." The term refers to the Holy Tabernacle, specifically a curtain used at the "door of the tabernacle" (לְפֶתַח הָאֹהֶל, cf. Ex 26:36; 36:37; 39:38, or "the door of the tabernacle of meeting" cf. Nm 3:36 25; 4:25: פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, or "door of the tabernacle" cf. Ex 40:5,28: הַפֶּתַח לַמִּשְׁכָּן, or "door of the entrance of the tabernacle" cf. Ex 35:15: הַפֶּתַח לְפֶתַח הַמִּשְׁכָּן), as well as "at the gate of the court" of the Tabernacle (לְשַׁעַר הֶחָצֵר cf. Ex 27:16; 35:17; 38:18; 39:40; 40:8,33; Nm 3:26, "at the gate of the entrance of the court" cf. Nm 4:26: פֶּתַח שַׁעַר הֶחָצֵר). The term is also mentioned about the "veil of the covering" (פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ cf. Ex 35:12), which was placed over the ark of testimony (אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת cf. Ex 40:21, also seems to refer to the ark in Nm 3:31. In Nm 4:5 we have the expression: וְהוֹרִדוּ אֵת פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ וְכִסּוּ־בָהּ אֵת אֲרֹן הָעֵדֻת "They shall take down the veil, the covering/covering, and cover the ark of the testimony with it", the expression פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ being translated by Ananias: "the shade curtain"). Moses tells us (39:31, v. 32 in TM) that "all the work of the tabernacle of the tabernacle of the tabernacle of the tabernacle of meeting (מוֹעֵד אֹהֶל מִשְׁכָּן) is finished". He mentions three kinds of "coverings" (dp. Anania translation): two of animal skins (מִכְסֵה עֹרֹת) and one, called "the veil of the covering" (פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ) ("the middle curtain" cf. Ex 39:34 dp. Anania translation).

[5] Early Romanian translations, such as MS. 4389, MS. 45, and the 1688 Bible, use the term "covering" (MLD II 1991, 184-185). Peter Paul Aron translates the phrase as "they put the veil on his face," which he "uncovered until he came out," and then "covered his face again when he spoke to them," noting that it was "horned" (Ex 34:33-35), as referenced in the Blaj Vulgate Bible. Samuil Micu also opts for the term "covering," but in verse 35 prefers the verb "to cover," as seen in the Blaj Bible. Vasile Radu and Gala Galaction use a Bulgarian term, "zabranic," which refers to a delicate fabric made of silk or wool, typically in black, in Ex 34:33-34, and "veil" in Ex 34:35, according to the Radu & Galaction Bible.

[6] In the teachings of Hillel, it is stated, "He who is ashamed does not teach." Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura adds, "He who is ashamed will always remain unbelievable, for he is ashamed to ask" (*Pirkei Avot* 2004, 60-61).

[7] In the book of Exodus, we can observe the progression in Moses' life. We can follow a process of spiritual ascent that evolves from the individual to the prophet, and ultimately to the man of God. In rabbinic literature, this progress is considered a more tragic evolution, marked by a distancing of Moses from the people. This separation arises from his personal spiritual growth, which creates an increasingly clear divide between him and the Israelites. Moses' distance from the people was not solely perceived in their minds; there was also a real physical barrier that separated them. In a spiritual sense, Moses attained the highest level possible for humanity. He attained a state in which he felt more comfortable with God than with people, shining with divine radiance in his "natural" state, unveiled. However, this elevation comes with a tragic correlation: his distancing from the people. Moses became a man of God and the teacher of the Torah. The chosen people needed a leader like him, as they could not have received the Torah without Moses. This is why it is rightly called the "Torah of Moses" (Mal 3:22; 4:6). The rabbis believe that without a prophet of Moses' stature, there would never have been a Torah. At the same time, it is thought that Moses lost an aspect of his personality, making it difficult for him to relate to the people as he once did.

[8] "Dieu transpar, pourrait-on dire, plus qu'il n'apapare" (cf. Fencing 2019, 41) can also have the meaning: God, instead, shows himself through something, rather than appearing suddenly.

[9] The encounter with divinity "in paradox and ambiguity, is a matter of relationship, rather than of logical argumentation", a "two-way relationship", in which it is no longer a question of "who I see, but of Whom I am seen", "the object of sight" becomes "a subject", which "approaches" man, from outside his being "and reveals the consequences of His work" in His creation (Constas 2017, 15-16).

[10] "He who speaks with the good God must impress himself with as much resemblance as possible to Him" (Dionysius 1996, 260-261).

[11] „... quanquam et in Vetere Novum lateat, et in Novo Vetus pateat ..." (Augustinus 1865a, 623).

[12] „Haec est justitia Dei, quae in Testamento Veteri velata, in Novo revelatur" (Augustinus 1865b, 212).

[13] „Haec gratia in Testamento vetere velata latitabat, quae in Christi Evangelio revelata est" (Augustinus 1865b, 217).

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"In the Hollow of the Rock on Horeb" – God's Sight, Optical Perception, or Spiritual Understanding?

Abstract

"Primum videre" is a saying from the ancients that highlights the fundamental importance of sight. In Holy Scripture, the descriptions of God often fluctuate between two attributes: the seen and the unseen. Many biblical passages in the Old Testament emphasize that God is unseen or cannot be seen. He is "unseen" because He remains a mystery or secret; He is transcendent, existing beyond the limits of our sensory experience—the Absolute who cannot be confined or reduced to an image. However, numerous texts also state that specific individuals, particularly those chosen by Him who have grown in virtue, have experienced God revealing or disclosing Himself to them. The New Testament makes it clear that God has fully revealed Himself in Christ. This study begins with the classic New Testament verse Jn 1:18 and draws attention to the intriguing contrast between the seen and the unseen, or between sight and blindness. It seeks to provide a relevant answer—through the insights of the Church Fathers—to the question posed in the title, which pertains to anyone aware of their status as a creature.

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Preliminaries

"Primum videre" was a saying of the ancients that emphasized the fundamental importance of sight. In Germanic languages, the word "wardon" meant "to observe" or "to watch over." This term led to words like "guard," "guardian," and "wardrobe," all of which are related to the actions of watching, guarding, or supervising. The verb "to see" (*ὁράω*), used by biblical authors, also comes from an Indo-European root and

effectively conveys the act of knowing. Many of our words, such as "visible," "seen," "vision," "supervision," "revision," "review," "celebrity," and "glimpse," are derived from this verb (Ravasi 2023, 266).

In the New Testament—particularly in the Johannine writings—"to see" or "to behold" often also means "to (re)cognize," with the sense of a confession of faith:

> "We *have seen* his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father» (Jn 1:14);
> "You will *see* greater things than these.» (Jn 1:50);
> "You will *see* heaven opened." (Jn 1:51);
> "Sir, we wish *to see* Jesus." (Jn 12:21);
> "Whoever *has seen* me *has seen* the Father." (Jn 14:9);
> "Have you believed because you have *seen me*? Blessed are those who have not *seen* and yet have believed." (Jn 20:29);
> "That which we *have seen* and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us" (1Jn 1:1-3).

These statements present a stark contrast to others that describe God as "unseen" (*ἀόρατος*). For example, it is written, "He (Christ) is the image of the *invisible God*" (Col 1:15); "*invisible*, the only God" (1Tm 1:17); "By faith he (Moses) left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him *who is invisible*." (Heb 11:27). God is considered "unseen" because He embodies mystery and secrecy. He is transcendent, existing beyond the limits of our sensory experience, and is the Absolute who cannot be confined or reduced to a mere image.

The statements we find about God in the pages of Holy Scripture oscillate between these two attributes, between the *seen* and the *unseen*. Saint Paul tells us that the Son of God, the Savior Christ, is "the image of the *invisible God*" (*εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου*—Col 1:15). At the same time, the Savior assures us that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (Jn 14:9). The person who has purified themselves of passions and sins, the "pure in heart," can see God (Mt 5:8). In heavenly Jerusalem, the servants of the Lord "will *see* His face forever» (Rev 22:4), an experience denied «to those who do evil» (3Jn 11).

The verb "to see" (*ὁράω*) is used in the New Testament to describe the encounters of disciples or myrrh-bearing women with the Risen Christ; these are encounters somewhat improperly called "apparitions." The evangelists say that the Lord: "appeared" (*ἐφανέρωσεν*); "revealed Himself" or "was seen"; He allowed Himself to be recognized

personally (ὤφθη), a word used by Saint Paul in the pericope of 1Cor 15:1-8. Saint Luke, in the "Road to Emmaus" episode (da Spinetoli 1999, 732), preserves this tension between *sight* and *blindness*, saying of the two disciples that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Lk 24:16) and that only at the breaking of the bread "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him," yet the Lord "vanished from their sight." (Lk 24:31). Thus, Christ reveals Himself, yet somehow remains in the glory of the unseen God (Ravasi 2023, 266).

Any encounter between two persons represents *a dialogue of faces*; the biblical author says that "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11); "with him (Moses) I speak *mouth to mouth*, *clearly*, and not in riddles, and *he beholds the form of the Lord*" (Nm 12:8); Moses spoke with the Lord as two friends or two lovers speak when, having no more words, they silently gaze at one another.

For Semitic thought, the noun *panîm* ("face" or "countenance")—used very frequently in the pages of the Old Testament (2,127 times)—is a plural form indicating the complexity of a face that is never merely a cutaneous phenomenon, a complex of sensory organs, but an *expressive sign of communication*. For this reason, in the pages of Holy Scripture, the *face* or *countenance* can also indicate the *interior of a person*, not just what is outwardly visible; a person's face always betrays their interior, *negatively*: "So Cain was very angry, and *his face fell*" (Gn 4:5-7a) or *positively*: after receiving from the priest Eli the confirmation that the Lord would hear her prayer, Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, *had a different countenance*: "Then the woman went her way and ate, and *her face was no longer sad*" (1Sam 1:18).

We are interested in the *face* or *countenance of God* and the *possibility* of *seeing* Him. If, as we have seen, the face indicates, for Semitic thought, the person themselves, it is easy to guess why the sight of the Lord›s face is refused or forbidden to humans. The ancients believed that humans, being sinful, could not survive this experience: «But, He said, *you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live*" (Ex 33:20); "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8).

Resorting to anthropomorphism, the hagiographers used *symbolism* to speak of God. Thus, they speak of the *eyes* of the Lord (Cantalamessa 2015, 59-60) that scrutinize human hearts: "Search me, O God, and *know* my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me" (Ps 139:23-24a; Ps 26:2); of the *eyes* of the Lord that cannot see (cannot tolerate) iniquity: "You who are of purer eyes than to see

evil and *cannot look* at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" (Hab 1:13); of the *mouth* of the Lord that utters judgments and gives commands (Ps 119:13); of the *ears* of the Lord that "hear the prayers of His servants" (Ps 130:2).

Also, in the Book of Psalms, the idea of *the possibility of seeing the Lord's face* when a person enters the holy place to pray gradually takes shape: "He loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." (Ps 11:7); "As for me, I shall behold *your face* in righteousness" (Ps 17:15); "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Ps 42:2); "Your face, Lord, I will seek" (Ps 26:13). If a person commits sin and persists in it, the Lord "and hide my face from them" (Dt 31:17); knowing themselves to be sinful, a person begs God not to turn His face away from them: "*Hide not your face from me*, lest I be like those who go down to the pit." (Ps 143:7); a person knows that if the Lord turns His face away from His creation, "they die" and "return to their dust" (Ps 104:29). Finally, the human created "in our image, after our likeness" (Gn 1:26) has inscribed in their genetic code *the search for God*: "Such is the generation of those who seek him, *who seek the face of the God of Jacob*" (Ps 24:6).

In the Synoptic Gospels, God is the One who "*is* and *sees* in secret" (Mt 6:4,8,18); He counts our steps and the hairs of our head (Mt 10:30; Lk 12:7), He cares for His creation, yet His dwelling place is "heaven" (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2); He is "our heavenly Father" (Mt 6:32). Thus, no matter how intense, our relationship with Him seems to be one "at a distance": "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself." (Ps 80:14-15). Psalm 80[1], in its entirety, has as its refrain the words: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!" (Ps 80:3,7,19). The absolute novelty highlighted by the evangelist John, more than the Synoptic evangelists, is that our Father is not only "in heaven" but also "with us on earth" in the person of Christ. God "appeared," in Christ, to people[2]; *He revealed Himself* perfectly (Cantalamessa 2015, 101-2).

"No one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18a)

The classic New Testament text containing both statements—that God *cannot be seen*, but that, in Christ, *seeing Him is possible*—is represented by the last verse of the celebrated *Johannine Prologue* (Jn 1:18), which forms a literary unit with the entire

Christological hymn and contains a very well-known statement in biblical tradition: "*No one has ever seen God*; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, *he has made him known*." The name of God placed at the beginning of the sentence is in the accusative and links the assertion: "No one has ever seen God" (18a) with what is affirmed in the second part of the verse: "God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (18b). If this is so, then verse 18 contains an opposition between "seeing" and "making known," which could be formulated more explicitly as follows: "Indeed, no one has ever seen God, but the Only Begotten Son (of the Father), He has made Him known (revealed Him)."

In a situation without exit or resolution (given by *the impossibility of seeing God*), the Only Begotten Son intervened[3], because only He could do it, for, as the evangelist John affirmed in the hymnic Prologue, He Himself is God and is intimately united with the heavenly Father, being begotten of the Father. Within this verse (18), we see that, as in verse 14, the word "God" is substituted with that of "Father," and we highlight the dialectic of "seeing/making known."

Verse 18 expresses three fundamental things: first, the statement that *no one has ever seen God*; second, that the Son is the mediator of seeing God (Mihoc 2003, 54); and third, that the Only Begotten Son has made God known to people.

We will analyze them in turn. According to Holy Scripture, *seeing God* represents the profound aspiration of the faithful person.

It is quite tricky, however, to choose the most appropriate variant of the verb "to see" in the Greek language of the New Testament, because the New Testament authors use several words with slightly different meanings. The most frequently used verb is *ὁράω* (*to see*), used 448 times in the New Testament. In the conjugation of this verb, we also find the root of the Romanian verb "to see," more precisely the aorist form *εἶδον* (a form that appears 350 times in the New Testament), a root we also find in the sacred Indian tradition (the holy Indian revelation is contained in the collection of the four "Vedas"). The verb "to see" and, alongside it, the verb "to believe" are two key verbs in the Fourth Gospel[4].

In the pages of the Old Testament, *seeing God* was «reserved» only for those at the beginning of the visible world, and later this experience of encountering God took place within religious worship. First in the Holy Tabernacle, then in the Temple of Jerusalem, the glory of God dwelt, and only in the holy place could the human desire *to see God* be symbolically satisfied. To see God does not refer to, or indicate, merely an intellectual

contemplation, but *a spiritual experience*, a "face to face" or a "tête-à-tête" with the Living God (Martini 2022, 487-500).

Two biblical traditions tell us why humans cannot see God. According to the most widespread view, this impossibility derives from *the fallen and sinful condition of humans*[5]. The world cannot approach the Holy One without suffering the consequences. The prophet Isaiah, when called by God to his mission, exclaimed: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; *for my eyes have seen* the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Is 6:5).

Another tradition links the impossibility of humans seeing God directly to *divine transcendence*. God is the Absolute, independent of any condition and not subject to any restriction; God is transcendent; He passes beyond the horizon of our experience. Philo of Alexandria expressed this admirably, speaking of God's appearance to Abraham: "God went out to meet him (Abraham) and showed him *what he was able to see*. For this reason, it is not said that the wise Abraham *saw* God, but only that God *revealed Himself* to him" (Philo of Alexandria, *De Abrahamo*, 8). Strictly speaking, we should say that "God reveals Himself" (that He *revealed Himself* or *appeared*), and not that "He is seen," because God is not an "object" that must or can be looked at, but a "subject" who allows Himself to be encountered. And because the two partners who meet are not on an equal footing, it is appropriate to highlight, in common speech, the priority or initiative of God about humans (Dufour 2007, 131).

In this sense, biblical wisdom literature has said and emphasized repeatedly that humans *cannot approach God* and cannot fully express or comprehend His works:

> "Could we say much (about God), without ever finishing; in a word, He is all. How shall we glorify Him? For He is greater than all His works. The Lord is to be feared and very great, and His power is wonderful [...] Who has seen Him and will tell? And who will glorify Him as He is? Many and greater than these are hidden; for we have seen but a few of His works" (Sir 43:31-32, 36) or
>
> "The power of His glory, who shall measure it? And who shall be able to declare His mercies? It is not possible to diminish, nor to add, nor to search out the wonderful works of the Lord" (Sir 18:3-4)[6].

Note that this wisdom tradition employs the verb *ἐξηγήστο/ἐξηγήστε* (*He revealed*), a verb also used in the text of Jn 1:18, a fact that confirms the Johannine Prologue's affiliation with the wisdom tradition (Brown 1999, 49-50). In the Gospel

of John, the echo of this line of thought is heard: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (Jn 3:13). And in this case, as in Jn 1:5, it is not about the sinful condition of humans, but about their condition as creatures before the One who brought them into existence, the Only One who can reveal or disclose Himself. This conviction could explain a vital exception, very ancient, which affirms that some (admittedly few) *were able to see God* and remain alive: "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." (Ex 24:9-11). After Samson›s parents spoke with the angel of the Lord and understood that the one who appeared to them was indeed the angel of the Lord, Manoah said to his wife: "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (Jdg 13:22). The woman, however, proves wiser than her husband, considering that God does not reveal Himself and His will to kill humans, but so that humans may know and fulfill His will (Jdg 13:23).

Holy Scripture presents several "appearances" of the Lord or His angels and "visions" of heavenly things granted to the chosen ones of the Lord who belonged to the First Covenant. Still, God revealed (or allowed Himself to be seen) only "from behind" or "in part" (as in a mirror, in riddles), which means He reveals Himself only in *symbols*[7]. One of the frequent symbols through which biblical authors indicate divinity is *fire*, as we see in the episode of the *burning bush* (Ex 3:6). Before that experience (which Moses *desired to look at closely*), the human subject *covers his face*, "for he was *afraid to look* at God.» (Ex 3:6). But even in this well-known case, the biblical text tells us that «*the angel of the Lord appeared* in a flame of fire» (Ex 3:2a).

Two other testimonies (though there are more) show us that God appeared or spoke "from the midst of the fire":

> "Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice." (Dt 4:12) or
>
> "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire" (Dt 4:15).

The prophet Elijah the Tishbite, on the other hand, felt (discovered) the nearness (even the presence) of God in a "still small voice" (1Kgs 19:12), but he too *covered his*

face with his mantle (the cloak he wore) and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave (1Kgs 19:13). Thus, only through a *symbol* (or a discreet sensory mediation) can humans encounter divine majesty (Dufour 2007, 132).

According to another mode of expression—well known to biblical authors—a "veil," "curtain," or "covering" separates the sight of the Lord from human eyes, a *veil* that could take the form of a *cloud* (*bright* or *of fire*), a *cloud* that hid what should not be revealed. With a *veil*, Moses covered his face after he finished speaking with the leaders of the congregation of the sons of Israel (Ex 34:33). "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth—says the prophet Isaiah in a well-known messianic prophecy—and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you" (Is 60:2). This until the *veil* (which covered Moses› face) is removed: «And he will swallow up on this mountain—it is about Mount Zion—the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.» But not only the *veil* or *curtain* will be «removed,» but, above all, death will be abolished forever (Is 25:7-8a).

The *veil*, *curtain*, or *veil*[8] that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies in the holy place symbolized precisely this impossibility (inability) of humans to see God «face to face.»

The diversity of traditions related to *the impossibility of seeing God* is justified by the fact that Theology (and theologians) must express themselves about this subject: *the relationship humans have with God*. If I ask this question from my perspective as a human, then it is not hard to realize that the impossibility of seeing the Lord is due to my state (or condition) as a sinful human, a condition that does not allow me to see (or stand near) God[9]. If I ask this question from the Lord's perspective, then I say that God does not allow Himself to be "domesticated" or represented by a sensory image; He does not want to be treated as an object but reveals or shows Himself to humans *when* and *how* He wills (Dufour 2007, 132).

"God the only Son, who is at the Father's side" (Jn 1:18b)

According to Pauline theology, the *veil* that separated God from human sight was removed when God became incarnate, became Man in Christ: in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul affirms that until his time, "when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses (that is, the Torah) is read a veil lies over their hearts" (2Cor 3:14-15). Only *turning to the Lord* (through repentance) guarantees the lifting or

removal of the veil (2Cor 3:16).

The mediator of our access to divine glory is "the Only Begotten Son," who is "from the Father" (Jn 1:14) or "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18). The evangelist calls Christ "Only Begotten from the Father" to show us clearly who Christ is; He is the Son of God or the incarnate Logos in history (Jn 1:1). Saint John adds—precisely for clarity—the fact that the "Only Begotten Son," the Word or the Incarnate Logos is Himself the true God, a somewhat curious clarification, given that immediately after comes the statement that God "has never been seen by anyone." Nevertheless, if the evangelist John affirms that Jesus—as the incarnate Logos—is the true God, could it be that he intends to force the paradox? The evangelist wants to tell us that only God can speak adequately about Himself (Dufour 2007, 133).

As is known, the Greek word *kólpos* (*bosom*) indicates the upper part of the human thorax[10]; thus, the expression "to be in the bosom of the Father" does not necessarily indicate the "consubstantiality" of the Son with the Father but indicates the "intimacy" of the Son with His Father. Using, in this case, the preposition *εἰς* (*in*) and not *ἐν* (*on*/*at*), as in the text of Jn 13:23 (referring to the gesture of the disciple John leaning on Jesus' breast, where the particle *ἐπὶ* is used), to indicate the relationship of intimacy, the evangelist John specifies that it is not only about *the unique degree of closeness* of the Son to the Father but also about a kind of *finality* expressed by the Belgian exegete Ignace de Poitiers: "The Only Begotten Son is directed toward the heart of the Father" (Ignace de la Potterie 1977, 234).

This is His essence, as the present form of the verb *ho ōn* says. It is not something "occasional" that Jesus is directed toward His Father; this is not something the Son does "from time to time," but He is entirely, totally, and always directed toward His Father; His present indicates a presence (a situation) that goes beyond what some of the Church Fathers called the "beatific vision." With His whole being, with all His words and deeds, the Savior Christ "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14).

"He (Christ) has made him known (God)" (Jn 1:18c)

To tell us what exactly the Logos accomplished among humans, the evangelist John had at his disposal several classical terms, but he did not use the term *ἀπο-καλύπτω* (to reveal, to unveil, to disclose)[11], nor *δεικνύω* (*to show, to indicate*[12], nor *φανερόω* (*to show* or *to manifest*), as in the text of Jn 17:6: "I have manifested your name

to the people whom you gave me out of the world." Why did the evangelist choose such a discreet term—which refers to *interpretation*—like *ἐξ-ηγέομαι* (*to narrate, to make known, to explain*)? The verbs he could have used (and which we mentioned above) are related to the idea of "seeing," typical of the apocalyptic genre, which the biblical theme (also mentioned above) of the *veil* or *curtain* could favor. The evangelist John, however, moves in a different cultural space, being much closer, as we have seen, to the wisdom tradition (Dufour 2007, 134).

On the other hand, the evangelist John proves to be the heir of the ancient biblical tradition according to which "seeing" God was "postponed" for "the last times" (for "the fullness of time" Gal 4:4), while "hearing" (a voice or a word) implies, at the same time, God's communication with humans through the word (Grilli 2011, 7) (but also through the Word or divine Logos) and the submission or obedience of humans to this Word. For the pious and devout Jew, *listening to the word of God* was the most important thing.

Within the Johannine Prologue, the Logos or the Word of God—Himself the true God—is the main subject. The idea of "seeing," "unveiling," or "revealing" is substituted by the Word that "is heard"—but in the New Testament, it is also "seen." After receiving the news of the Savior's birth from the angel, the shepherds say: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Lk 2:15) (Valentini 2017, 270-271). Hence, in our text, there is a verb—*ἐξ-ηγέομαι*—which refers to language and which, according to the adopted translation, means "to make God known."

Exegetes have seen in these linguistic details the influence of Greek religion: the servants of pagan sanctuaries or temples also fulfilled the function of "exegetes" or "interpreters" of divine oracles (*theîa*). The philosopher Plato, in his work—*Republic*—says of the god Apollo that "he established his dwelling in the center (the navel) of the earth—at Delphi—as the traditional interpreter of religion (*patrios exēgētēs*) to guide the human race" (Plato 2022, 169)[13]; from this god, people expected the legislation by which to conduct their lives. Now, this hypothesis has no foundation in the Johannine text and does not reflect, however little, the mentality of the biblical authors, according to which truth is not what *is sought* or *discovered*, without regard to its relationship or connection with life (Dufour 2007, 135).

Therefore, it is preferable to consider the original meaning of the term *ἐξ-ηγέομαι*, which, both in the Greek literature of New Testament times and in the literature of the

New Testament, means "to make known" or "to explain in detail."

It is also interesting that the verb ἐξ-ηγέομαι is used to indicate *the narration of an eyewitness*, as in the text of Mk 5:16: "And those who had seen it described to them what had happened (*διηγήσαντο*) to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs." The disciples who were witnesses to the Transfiguration are told "not to tell (*διηγήσωνται*) anyone what they had seen on the mountain" (Mk 9:9). In this sense, the verb *ἐξ-ηγέομαι* is the most appropriate within the Johannine Prologue: the Only Begotten Son—as the true God—the only one who descended from heaven, the Witness par excellence, can "narrate" or "make God known" (Mihoc 2003, 54, 134), because He narrates what He has seen: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 5:19). The Son's narration is "authentic" because only God can speak about God.

About Wisdom—another name for the Word of God—which no human can fully comprehend with their mind, it is said that "God has weighed it," "set it in the light," and "measured its depth"—another translation says, "God has narrated it" (Job 28:27).

Translating the verb *ἐξ-ηγέομαι* in this form allows us to remain close to the idea of the Logos or the Word (the main subject of the Johannine Prologue). An impossible *seeing*—something that would belong to immediate evidence—is substituted by the act of *speaking* of the One who is Himself the Word of God, an act that invites "listening" (Grilli 2011, 7).

John the Baptist—in chapter 3 of the Fourth Gospel—says: "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God" (Jn 3:34). The Logos or the Word of God said: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9) and tells it to us—who believe those who have seen Him.

In Place of Conclusions

The phrase "No one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18) could be—and often is—the statement of a discouraged person who has sought God and not found Him. In a certain sense, the same phrase could be the statement of the atheist or the agnostic, to whom the Gospel—especially that of John—offers a valid answer: with the Incarnation of the Son of God, we can no longer say this! In Jesus Christ, God came out of the inaccessible light in which He dwells and *revealed Himself* or *appeared* (Tit 3:4).

The phrase "God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" represents, therefore, the vigorous affirmation of the Gospel that claims and proclaims the fact that God *appeared* in Christ and that Christ is the only "exegete" or "interpreter" of God: "And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, *his form you have never seen*" (Jn 5:37).

We have seen that in the pages of Holy Scripture, the statement that "No one has ever seen God" is opposed by the statement that, nevertheless, to some people (His chosen ones) God has appeared (revealed Himself). St. Gregory of Nyssa says that God appeared to humans in two ways: *in light* and *in darkness*. It is a paradoxical way of speaking about the *appearance* and *seeing of God*. For ordinary (natural) humans, seeing in darkness is impossible.

> The human mind—affirms Saint Gregory—advances toward knowledge and comes ever closer to seeing (that is, to contemplation). But while doing this, it seems that, in fact, the divine nature is 'unseen' (unintelligible). Only by 'leaving behind all that is seen' will it continually advance toward spiritual vision and will eventually see 'what is unseen' or impossible to see and understand. For, in the end, *to know Him (God) lies precisely in not knowing Him*. Because the One sought is above all knowledge, surrounded by His incomprehensibility, as by darkness. That is why the wise John, having reached this *bright darkness*, says: '*No one has ever seen God*' (Jn 1:18). Because the knowledge of the divine being remains unapproachable not only to humans but to the entire intelligible nature (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 123-4).

"Moses—affirms Scripture—spoke with God as one speaks with a friend" (Ex 33:11), but this happened only after he grew stronger in knowledge. Yet, although "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend," it seems it was not enough for Moses, for he asks the Lord to show Himself, "as if the One always seen by him had not appeared before: *Please show me your glory!*" (Ex 33:18). St. Gregory of Nyssa, commenting on this biblical passage, says:

> The servant asks the Master to show Himself, and the Lord answers the one who asks and does not reject his desire, but saddens him again, telling him that, in fact, what he asks the Lord cannot yet be contained in human life. Nevertheless, there is a place—*in the cleft of a rock on Mount Horeb*—where the servant could place himself, a place from which he could see the back of the Lord (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 150-1).

The same holy father warns us not to take *literally* these words, because if we do so, their meaning will remain hidden or impenetrable.

> Only to things that have a form—says Saint Gregory—can one speak of a face or a back. But any form limits a body. Therefore, he who imagines a form in God will not consider that He (the Lord) is free from a bodily nature [...] If, therefore, someone understands ‹the back of God› literally, he is led to this madness by the natural chain of thought. Because the front and the back belong only to a form, and the form is proper to the body [...] But then, what is the proper meaning of what is written (in Ex 33:18-23), apart from the literal one? And if this part of the written word of Scripture compels us to seek and find another meaning, it is fitting, without doubt, to understand the entire narrative in the same way (symbolically or spiritually), for the meaning we find in part must be seen (also) in the whole. Therefore, the place near God and the rock in that place and *the cleft of the rock* and Moses› entrance into it and the covering of its mouth by the divine hand, and the passing and calling of God and then the seeing of His back must be understood (comprehended) by lifting them to a higher plan (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 152-3).

Saint Basil the Great saw in "the cleft of the rock on Horeb" the image of the Church and the Holy Spirit:

> What is for us Christians that cleft (or that place) where we could withdraw to contemplate and worship God? Of the Spirit, Scripture says: '*Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock*.' (Ex 33:21). By the word 'place,' what else is understood if not *contemplation in the Spirit*, (a state) in which, finding himself, Moses was able to see God, who appeared to him to the extent he could be known? This (the Holy Spirit) is the proper place for true worship (adoration). What other place shall we bring it? To the place of the Spirit, as the Lord says: 'The true worshipers will worship the Father *in spirit* and truth› (Jn 4:23) [...] The Spirit is truly the sanctifying place. And the saints are the ‹place› fit for the Spirit, for they offer themselves as a dwelling for God and become His temple» (St. Basil the Great 1988, 77).

If in a certain sense we humans are "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1Cor 6:19), in another sense the Holy Spirit is our place (or sanctuary) of worship. We are His human temple, and He is our divine temple (Cantalamessa 2022, 210).

What beauty and power this gives to Christian worship! At times, we all feel the need to withdraw from the tumult of the world "into the cleft of the rock on Horeb" to worship God in silence and peace, as the great Moses once did. There is a place or a space—a kind of unseen niche—within us, always ready to receive us, wherever we are and whatever we do; in this "niche," we can worship God "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23-24).

Freed from earthly passions, the human soul soars lightly toward the heights, rising from the lowly to the exalted.

> "The great Moses—says St. Gregory of Nyssa—ascending continually, never stops climbing, nor does he set a limit (boundary) for himself in the movement toward the heights, but, once he has set his foot on the ladder that leans on God, as Jacob says, he steps always to the step above and never ceases to rise, because he continually discovers something above the step reached in his ascent to the heights" (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 154).

Consumed by thirst or longing for God, Moses

> burns with desire and is hungry for more [...] And, as if he had not yet partaken, he prays to obtain, asking God to show Himself, not as much as he (Moses) can see, but as much as He is.

Saint Gregory calls this longing or yearning for *seeing the glory of God* a kind of "passion" or "the love of the sentient soul for the One who is by nature good, holy, and just".

> Therefore, the ardent lover of the Beautiful, rejoicing in the One who always appears to him higher, as an image of the desired One, wishes to partake of the very face of the archetype (model). For this is the bold request of desire that surpasses all boundaries: to rejoice in the Beautiful, not through mirrors and images, but face to face (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 155-6).

In the same paradoxical way, which we have seen so many times in the binomial "seeing/not seeing" in the pages of Holy Scripture—Saint Gregory expresses himself:

> And the divine voice *gives* him (Moses) what he asks *by not giving it*, showing him, in few words, a depth immeasurable in meanings. For the great generosity of God was pleased to fulfill Moses' desire but did not promise him (at all) any cessation and satiety of desire. Because He would not show Himself to the servant as He is, if what he sees in Him were such as to make the desire of the one who sees cease. For to truly see God consists in this: that the one who looks at Him never reaches the end (the limit) of the desire to see Him (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 156).

This is what it means *to truly see God*: never to find any satiety in the desire to know Him. Always, the one who seeks God and wants to see Him must burn with the desire to see ever more.

The great Moses, however, saw something: he saw—says Scripture—"the back of the Lord" (Ex 33:23). Humans cannot see God "face to face."

> The same God—affirms Saint Gregory—who once spoke to Moses, says to His disciples, revealing the meaning of what was once said in riddles, saying: 'If anyone would come after me' (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). The same thing He says to the one who asks Him for eternal life: 'Come, follow Me' (Mt 19:21). *And he who follows (someone) sees the back of the one before him*. Therefore, Moses, who now desires to see God, is now taught how God can be seen: *to see God means to follow God wherever you go* (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 164).

There is, however, another possibility (the one that descends, not the one that ascends): when the people of Israel saw that Moses delayed, they went to Aaron and said, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us" (Ex 32:1); gods to follow. But before this new "god" (which was an idol in every sense, made from the gold offered by its worshipers), the people behaved strangely: this new "god" no longer inspired fear and trembling in them[14]. Moreover, Israel attributed to this new "god" the miracle of liberation from Egyptian bondage and celebrated a feast (Ex 32:6).

The desire *to see God* is at the origin of any human restlessness. Still, the same willingness could paradoxically become the beginning or foundation of any religious aberration: in the sense that humans, incapable of living without God and, on the other hand, discouraged and disappointed by the Lord, who seems to want to remain in His unseen space—for, in any case, He does not allow Himself to be "domesticated"[15]—humans, I say, are willing to fashion for themselves a "god" after their image, that is,

an *idol*, a *seen* and *tangible* god, a god who will quickly resolve, in the way they want, all their whims and false needs.

Now we understand the meaning of the words: "You cannot see My face" (Ex 33:20,23). St. Gregory of Nyssa specifies:

> that is: do not pass (O man) before the One who guides you! For in this case, your path will be against Him. Because good does not oppose good, but follows it. And by the one who goes against well, understand the one who places himself before Him, for sin looks against virtue. Virtue, however, is not seen going against virtue. Moses does not look contrary to God but looks at what is behind Him (the back of the Lord), for he who looks contrary will not live. Therefore, the divine voice decrees: 'for man shall not see me and live!' (Ex 33:20) (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1995, 165).

In the episode of the "burning bush," Moses saw *a wonderful thing*: "I will turn aside to see *this great sight*, why the bush is not burned" (Ex 3:3). There was a question in his soul: Why does it burn and is not consumed? (that is, it burns but is not consumed, not destroyed, not annihilated). The Church Fathers are convinced that this question was inspired by the Holy Spirit, who was already directing his attention to the Logos. The Logos was—even in Greek mentality—the reason of all things. The Logos is—and in Christian thought—the place where all questions find their answer and from which they all depart, to penetrate and dwell entirely in the human heart. In this Logos is rooted our desire for meaning, our desire to understand everything, to know everything (Martini 2022, 522-3).

But behold *the scandal* on which the Church Fathers have paused and meditated at length: "And the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14); the Logos became small; "but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7), so that He is here, not elsewhere; He is now, not before or tomorrow; He made Himself, in a way, accessible, because He came near to us (even to the bodily); He openly offers Himself to an interpersonal relationship, a relationship that includes all of us, making Himself partaker of human nature, so that He can be encountered by each of us in a unique and perfect way.

From this familiarity that God had with Moses, almost unique in biblical history, the memory remains in the entire subsequent tradition. The author of the Book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, praising the servants of the Lord from the past, will say of Moses these things:

> "... Moses, beloved of God and men, whose memory is for a blessing, the Lord gave him the glory of the saints and magnified him with fear over his enemies; and by his words (Moses) the Lord performed swift miracles. He glorified him before kings; He gave through him commandments to His people and *showed him His glory*" (Sir 45:1b-4).

This relationship so familiar and so intimate between a mortal and God, this "face to face" (Ex 33:11; Dt 34:10), was "reserved" only for Moses. But when the Logos became incarnate in history, behold, God diminished (emptied) Himself, not only because He assumed a dimension (human nature) that He did not have before, but because He "particularized" Himself (became concrete; individualized Himself). As troubling and scandalous as this appearance of God in human flesh was, the Church Fathers were not afraid to approach it, to gaze at it with wonder and understand it; they even had the courage to say that, by becoming incarnate, the Word of God, who is so radiant or who has so much light that He can illuminate, in an instant, the minds of all, at the same time appeared in opaque flesh; He thickened (or became coarse).

This "opacity" or this "diminution" of God is a "stumbling block" or "cause of scandal" for us who, with our "pagan" mentality, always desire "a sign from God" to believe in Him: "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?" (Jn 6:30). With our irreducibly philosophical mentality, we want "to catch" and "to comprehend" God in the nets of our mind, in our phenomenological and sociological laws, which regulate our religious manifestations. We would like a God who is understood by all in the same way. In this case, it happens that God, about whom we think we know everything, slips through our fingers, making Himself small to remain free or to remain Himself.

It is characteristic of the Lord to make Himself small (to diminish or empty Himself), but in a way that He is not constrained by this diminution. Conversely, the greater our ideas or opinions about God, the more the Lord surpasses or transcends them.

The Lord is great and small at the same time, escaping our attempts to "program" our encounter and dialogue with Him; God is Love (1Jn 4:8 16), and love does not admit "scheduling"; God made Himself small (diminished Himself) overturning our attempts to comprehend Him in definitions and dogmatic formulas and gladly accepts being "a stumbling block" for all who do not wish to leave Him the freedom to love us as He wills, with an unpredictable, inventive, burning, tender, jealous, and fervent love.

The God of Holy Scripture and of the Holy Gospel always surprises and troubles us; even in our human loves, when they manifest in our souls, we continually discover unpredictable things: often you have the impression that you know the person beside you whom you love, only to discover immediately that you barely know them at all. God manifests Himself like a volcano, which does not tolerate being "controlled" or "monitored" to be found, through human calculations, where, when, and how to manifest. The God of Holy Scripture is utterly free from any conditioning, and so He is from one end to the other of Holy Scripture.

Through purification and an authentic Christian life, we can be in living contact with God, for "our life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), and precisely this "life in Christ" does not allow us to give up—as St. Gregory of Nyssa says—our perpetual advance in the knowledge of Him. Life in Christ is what allows us to see (by faith) God "face to face," discovering, at the same time, that not only do we know Him, but He also knows us as we are, that is, in that uniqueness which no one knows better than He and in that solitude which no human can explore in depth, and this until "we shall see him as he is." (1 Jn 3:2).

Notes

[1] Psalm 80 centers on two well-known theological themes: *the theme of the vine* (which is Israel, in a particular sense, and the world, in a general sense), and the theme of the *face of the Lord*, but the term around which the entire psalm gravitates is the verb *šûb* with its double meaning of "return" or "come back" and the sense of an imperative addressed to people: "return," "come back to yourselves" (in nature) or "repent" (Mt 3:2; Mk 1:4, 15). The theme of *returning to the Lord through repentance* appears frequently in the writings of the prophets (Is 31:6; 45:22; Jr 3:12; 4:1; Zh 1:3; Joel 2:12) and is the main theme of Psalm 80: the Lord «returns» or «turns His face toward His people,» and Israel is restored by returning to the Lord. This «return» is symbolically illustrated by the shining of the light of the Lord›s face over His servants (Ps 4:6; Ps 31:16; Ps 44:5; Ps 68:1-2; Ps 89:16; Ps 90:8; Ps 119:135; Job 29:3; Prov 16:15). The return of creatures to their God (through repentance) automatically attracts the shining of the Lord's face over them (Ravasi 2015, 677; see also Moldovan 2018).

[2] This statement is also taken up by Saint Paul, who, in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, expresses himself thus: "the knowledge of the glory of God shines on the face (countenance) of Christ" (2Cor 4:6). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews—using a *hapax legomenon*—will say that "the Son is the radiance of His glory and the *exact representation* of His being» (Heb 1:3a); The word *χαρακτὴρ* means "imprint" or

"engraving"; an exact reproduction of the original (Spicq 1953, 8).

[3] Ancient manuscripts present three slightly different variants for the expression "the Only Begotten Son": (a) "the Only Begotten God," (b) "the Only Begotten Son," (c) "the Only Begotten." The last variant (c) is without foundation and is found only in some Church Fathers. Variant (b) "the Only Begotten Son" is better attested and is used frequently by Saint John (Jn 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9), seeming to be a clarification of variant (a), which is the best attested in manuscripts (Dufour 2007, 129).

[4]

"We *have seen* his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14);

"When you were under the fig tree, *I saw you*" (Jn 1:48); "You *will see* greater things than these» (Jn 1:50);

"You *will see* heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man» (Jn 1:51);

"You are seeking me, not because *you saw* signs" (Jn 6:26);

"Then what sign do you do, that *we may see* and *believe* you?" (Jn 6:30); "Sir, we wish *to see* Jesus" (Jn 12:21);

"Whoever *has seen* me *has seen* the Father." (Jn 14:9);

"Have you believed because you *have seen me*? Blessed are those who have *not seen and yet have believed*" (Jn 20:29);

"Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and *he saw and believed*" (Jn 20:8);

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which *we have seen* with our eyes, which *we looked* upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and *we have seen it*, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and *was made manifest to us*—that which *we have seen* and heard we proclaim also to you» (1Jn 1:1-3a).

[5] St. John Chrysostom, in *Homilies on Matthew*, says:

"God did not speak through writings with Noah, with Abraham and his descendants, with Job and with Moses, but spoke with them *face to face*, because *He found their soul pure*. When, however, the whole people fell into grave sins, then yes, then there was need for writings, for tablets, for the recording in writing of all the deeds and words of God [...] Over time, however, people turned away from the right path; some because of wrong teachings, others because of their life and conduct [...] Think how bad we have become! We, who were supposed to live so purely that we would no longer need the Holy Scriptures, but instead of paper, we

would have given our hearts to the Spirit to write on them, we have lost this honor and have come to need writings" (St. John Chrysostom 1994, 15).

[6] See also other texts, such as: Ps 106:2; Prov 30:4; Baruch 3:29.

[7] The symbol indicates a reality that *is* and *is not* the reality it indicates, which is of another nature. The human mind is what makes the connection between the symbol and the reality it indicates.

[8] The death of Jesus on the cross has as its immediate effect the "tearing" or "rending" of the veil (*καταπέτασμα*) of the Temple in Jerusalem: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mk 15:38). The fact is recorded by the evangelist Mark without any explanation, and finding a theological significance for this fact is left to the reader's discretion. There were, in fact, two veils: the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies and the veil that separated the Holy Place from the court of the priests (the one at the actual entrance to the Temple). Pierre Benoît considers that the evangelist thought of the outer veil, the one at the entrance to the holy place, a fact that would have had a stronger visual effect, for only this veil could be seen by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This outer veil was raised twice a day by the ordinary servant, while the second veil (which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies) was raised only once a year, on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The tearing or rending of the veil indicates, therefore, the suppression of the secret and exclusivism of Judaism. Divine worship and access to God cease to be the privilege of a single people, for this will be possible for all (including pagans). This is the profound meaning of the phenomenon produced by the death of the Savior on the cross (Benoît 1993, 294). Josephus Flavius (*Bell. Jud. 5.214*) describes the veil that separated the Holy Place from the exterior of the Temple as being "a kind of representation of the universe... it had embroidered on it the whole panorama of the heavens. In other words, the outer veil represented the vault of heaven. To pass beyond the outer veil and enter the Temple was like entering the heavens after death. There are only two texts in which the evangelist uses the verb 'to tear' (*σχίζω*) in Mk 1:10 (at the baptism of Jesus) and in Mk 15:38, at His death [...] Read in parallel with the account of the Lord's baptism, the tearing of the veil would indicate the revelatory act by which God definitively leaves the Temple. The tearing of the veil presupposes the judgment of the Temple and the cessation of its lawful activity (Drimbe 2024, 214-215).

[9] At the end of the episode known as "The Miraculous Catch of Fish" (Lk 5:4-11), the apostle Peter fell at Jesus' feet, saying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8).

[10] The woman rests at the breast of her husband (Dt 28:54), and the man finds rest

at her breast (Dt 28:56). This image denotes an affectionate (loving) attitude, specific to spouses, or specific to mothers who hold and protect their children at their breasts.

[11] We have only one exception in Jn 12:38, where the evangelist quotes a text from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Is 53:1).

[12] See the following texts: Jn 5:20; 10:32; Jn 14:8: "Lord, *show us the Father*, and it is enough for us."

[13] At Delphi, there was a stone believed to indicate the center of the world (of the Earth's disk). On this stone was placed the throne from which the Pythia gave oracles in delirium, and certain priests—called "interpreters" or "exegetes"—translated them into intelligible hexameters. Translator's note (199) from p. 462.

[14] "Fear and Trembling" is the title of a book written by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and published in 1843. His book was printed by Humanitas Publishing House in 2005.

[15] It is interesting and suggestive that Moses' desire to see the glory of God (Ex 33:18) is expressed immediately after the biblical author presented (in the previous chapter, Ex 32) the episode of the "Golden Calf," a classic case of idolatry. In fact, what was the sin of the sons of Israel? It was not about greed or making gold their own "god," for those people were willing to give up their gold. The golden calf was not considered a "foreign divinity," for it was worshiped as "the God of Israel" (Ex 32:4). The feast organized on that occasion was one in "honor" of the Lord (Ex 32:5). So then, why does Saint Paul and all of Scripture call that episode "idolatry" (1Cor 10:7)? It is idolatry because the relationship between the people and their God was changed. On Mount Sinai (when he received the Law), the people stood at a distance, filled with fear and trembling; at the foot of the mountain, however, the people ate, drank, and danced. It is a subtle attempt to "tame" or "domesticate" God, an attempt that God does not accept or tolerate (Cantalamessa 2022, 150-1).

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The Christological Character of Illuminations in Byzantine Old Testament Manuscripts

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament through the illustrations found in Byzantine biblical manuscripts, particularly those specific to the Byzantine Octateuch.The illustrations in the Octateuch continue the earlier Byzantine iconographic tradition, highlighting the Christological significance while appropriately employing typology without overusing symbols. For the Byzantines, typology was the most effective method for showcasing the Christological nature of the entire Old Testament, a perspective that can also be examined through the illustrated Octateuch.

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Introduction

The Christological interpretation of the Old Testament can be defined as a consistent theme throughout the patristic period and, more broadly, within the life of the Christian Church during the first millennium. From the beginning, this interpretation aimed to affirm the Church's identity of faith based on the Holy Scriptures, which were viewed as a unified whole intended to reveal Christ. The Church Fathers and early Christian writers employed a typological hermeneutical approach to highlight the person and saving work of Christ in their scriptural commentaries. Rev. E. Pentiuc emphasizes that

> the Christological interpretation is perhaps the most well-known and widespread Christian example of typological interpretation, which in turn is based on one of the

ancient Christian and Jewish hermeneutical premises—that the Bible is a perfectly harmonious document (Pentiuc 2019, 234).

The Christological aspects of the Old Testament are primarily traced from the second Christian century onward. St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher is recognized as the first Church Father to introduce this perspective on reading the Holy Scriptures. He exemplified this approach by practicing "a way" that our Lord Jesus Christ himself opened in the New Testament. He also initiated the Christological interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures during his conversation with Luke and Cleopas on the Road to Emmaus, when "beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them from all the scriptures about Himself" (Lk 24:27) (Pentiuc 2019, 234).

Over time, the patristic commentaries formed a comprehensive exegetical tradition that the Byzantine world sought to unify. This unification was achieved through chains of linked commentaries that often accompanied biblical texts in Byzantine manuscripts. Simultaneously, during the early Byzantine period of the 4th and 5th centuries, a visual tradition emerged, aiming to synthesize the biblical text through illuminations that adorned it. These illuminations gradually became standardized, ultimately providing the foundational inspiration for Byzantine iconography in all its expressions and significance within liturgical spaces.

In the following pages, we aim to highlight specific aspects that are often underrepresented in our specialized literature, particularly the Christological character of the illuminations in Byzantine Old Testament manuscripts. We will explore how these illuminations enhance the biblical text and reflect the exegetical tradition of the Eastern Church. Our focus will be on the Byzantine Octateuch, a type of Old Testament manuscript that reflects a well-defined tradition within the Byzantine cultural and theological context of the Middle period (843-1204), particularly regarding the interpretation of biblical texts through a Christological lens.

The Byzantine Octateuch

The Octateuch is a book format that follows the principle of the Pentateuch. It includes the first eight books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Theodoret of Cyr (d. 466) commented on these first eight books without using the term "Octateuch," which was later recorded by Procopius of Gaza (d. 538).

Generally, the Octateuch is recognized as a less common book format specific to the Byzantine world, primarily intended for the aristocracy. Its liturgical or anagogic role is somewhat limited.

K. Weitzmann argues that the origins of the illuminations in the Octateuch can be traced back to the pre-Constantinian period. He suggests that the Hebrew illuminated manuscripts created by Hellenized Jews in the region between Alexandria and Antioch, which are now lost, may have served as an initial source for the Christian iconography of the Old Testament. In the absence of conclusive evidence, Weitzmann examines the frescoes discovered in the synagogue at Dura-Europos (Syria), dating from the 3rd century A.D. He regards these frescoes as a crucial connection between the theorized Jewish manuscripts and Christian illuminated manuscripts (Weitzmann and Bernabò 1999, 299–311; Pentiuc 2019, 333–4). On the other hand, J. Lowden connects the origins of the illustrated Octateuch to the Middle Byzantine period, viewing it as a significant innovation of the Eastern world (Lowden 2010, 109). The debate remains unresolved, especially considering the recent discovery of a mosaic depicting Samson tying torches to the tails of foxes in a synagogue at Huqoq, near Capernaum, from the fourth and fifth centuries. This finding may provide additional insights into the intersection of Jewish and Christian traditions in terms of iconographic representation (Grey and Magness 2013: 1–30).

Currently, only six illuminated manuscripts are preserved, all of which date from between 1050 and 1300. These works reflect an earlier tradition that was maintained, without significant improvements, until the Palaiologos era. The later manuscripts aimed to uphold this tradition, leading to interdependence among them in terms of text, decorative chains, and illuminations. However, one of the six, BML MS Laur. Plut. 5.38 from Florence, has a different structure. Unlike the others, it lacks a catena, preface, or epilogue (Lowden 2010, 110). Initially dated between 1050 and 1075, this manuscript has been re-evaluated from a palaeographic perspective. Italian specialists now propose that it dates from the early part of the Palaiologos era (1275-1300) (Perria and Iacobini 1999, 69–111).

The six manuscripts that have been preserved are the following:

1. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), MS Vat. gr. 747 (ca. 1050-1075).
2. Smyrna – Evangelical School, MS A 1 (ca. 1125-1055) – was probably destroyed in 1922.

3. Istanbul – Topkapı Saray, MS gr. 8 (ca. 1125-1155).
4. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), MS Vat. gr. 746 (ca. 1125-1155).
5. Vatoped Monastery – MS 602. (ca. 1270-1300).
6. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML) Florence, Ms. Laur. Plut. 5.38 (ca. 1050-1075?) or (1275-1300)

The Role of Illuminations in the Byzantine Octateuch

John Lowden posits that the illuminations included in the Octateuch served a purpose beyond merely providing visual enjoyment for readers. He notes that the Octateuch was studied privately by members of the imperial family and the aristocracy, which suggests that the inclusion of these illuminations may have had deeper significance. While the exact reason remains uncertain, Lowden believes it warrants further investigation (Lowden 2010, 151).

The illuminations were added after the text and accompanying comments, notably seen in the Topkapı Octateuch, which contains no less than 86 free spaces designated for illuminations that were ultimately not created by the miniaturist artist (Takaguchi 2017, 216). While one might logically expect a complete integration of text, commentary, and image, the reality is quite different. According to J. Lowden, the extensive marginal commentaries found in the catenae of the Octateuchs do not appear to influence the content of the illuminations (Lowden 2010, 150). These commentaries are indeed intricate and reflect a high academic standard, synthesizing and highlighting an entire patristic tradition. Furthermore, the illuminations feature scenes that depict themes with historical or liturgical significance, which have entered the Church's tradition through apocryphal writings. R. Jensen notes that these illuminations allow access to a religious context that extends beyond the biblical narrative, incorporating commentaries, homilies, and exegetical treatises of a liturgical or theological nature—all of which represent the Church's established tradition at that time (Jensen 2007, 68). In summary, the Octateuch is structurally connected to the Church's earlier traditions, capitalizing on textual and commentary levels, as well as through the images and illuminations included in such codices.

Unlike the primary period, in which images typically have a symbolic and allusive character, the middle and late Byzantine periods demand an immediate concreteness that reflects the tradition of the Church. In this context, visual representations are not merely allusions or hints for the viewer or reader; instead, they are rich and complex

narratives that aim to capture as much of the story as possible. The selection of images, their composition, and the surrounding context serve to illuminate the meaning of the entire story or highlight key moments, even if sometimes it reduces to the presentation of a single fragment of text (Jensen 2007, 68).

In the case of the Byzantine Octateuch, the meaning of an image cannot exist independently of its narrative or literary context. Its advantage is that it can be entirely detached from the biblical references to which it relates. Although the illuminations can be viewed and interpreted individually, they generally resonate and reinforce one another to enhance the understanding of the story and emphasize its defining aspects. The purpose of the illuminations is to maintain the coherence of the narrative; one of the miniaturist artist's goals is to solidify the knowledge acquired by the viewer or reader. Consequently, these illuminations reveal an essential aspect of their didactic and pedagogical function. It is important to note that the illuminations remain effective only as long as this didactic and pedagogical purpose is fulfilled.

We should not view the didactic function of an illumination as its only purpose, as it does not exclude other functions, such as anagogic or liturgical aspects (Speiser 2017, 6). To achieve this, the artist or illuminator must incorporate mimetic elements, as F. Young suggests. This approach invites a deeper understanding of the biblical narrative, which is visually represented in a typological manner (Young 1977, 153). In some cases, these references are explicit, such as in the representation of Christ within a celestial nimbus in a limited number of illuminations. These depictions help guide the viewer toward discovering the "hidden meaning" that leads directly to Christ.

This method assumes a certain level of "theological literacy" and familiarity with the Church's exegetical tradition. Such knowledge enables the viewer to notice specific compositional details and understand the profound meanings present in the illuminations, as well as in the biblical texts to which they refer.

From an anagogical perspective, the illuminations of the Octateuch, along with other artistic representations of the Old Testament, should guide readers and viewers toward Christ. Without Christ, the Old Testament cannot be fully understood. Eastern artists and exegetes emphasize the Christological nature of the Old Testament in their illuminations, aiming to highlight the relevance and prophetic nature of the Hebrew Bible while maintaining its historical truth. As R. Jensen notes, "Unless the stories were both authoritative and true, their Christian significance would be undermined" (Jensen 2007, 74).

Old Testament Exemplification

In general, the illuminating artists of the Byzantine Octateuchs aimed to remain faithful to the literary meaning of the biblical text. Therefore, it is not surprising that the miniaturists in the first part of the Book of Genesis did not attempt to emphasize a Christological character in the scenes depicting the creation of the world and humanity, even though typological exegetical tradition would have allowed for such interpretations. Themes such as the creation of the world and humanity by the Incarnate Logos in the image of Christ, the contrast between Adam the Old and Adam the New (Christ), or the promise of a deliverer remain at the narrative level, depicted according to traditions established in earlier centuries. Only the scene of Cain and Abel, in which Abel is portrayed as a shepherd, can somewhat suggest a typological connection to Christ as the "Good Shepherd" due to its mimetic character. Similarly, although Noah is another biblical figure rich with typological significance—marked by associations between the floodwaters and Christian baptism, as well as the noetic ark and the Church (Giannoulis 2017, 205)—the illuminations related to him do not carry a Christological dimension but remain at a descriptive, narrative level.

However, Abraham's situation fundamentally changes in relation to the connection between the promise and its fulfillment. A series of typological aspects is automatically activated through which the revelation of Christ Himself is foreshadowed (Breck 2003, 40).

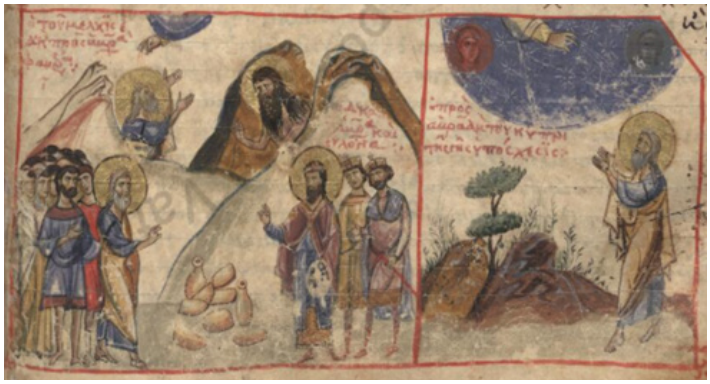

Fig. 1 Abraham and Melchizedek (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 68r)

The first scene in the cycle dedicated to the patriarch Abraham that captures our attention is his meeting with Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews establishes a strong typological relationship between Melchizedek (the type) and Christ (the antitype). This relationship is based on a hierarchy of eternal significance: "For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham [...] without a father, without a mother, without lineage, having neither the beginning of days nor the end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (Heb 7:1-3). Interestingly, the illumination specific to the Octateuch does not emphasize the "sacrifice" that Melchizedek offered, which consisted of bread and wine. Instead, it focuses on the "tithe" that Abraham gave to him (Gn 14:18-20). Although the "sacrifice" is presented to Abraham in the form of loaves and wine vessels, the scene centres on Abraham, depicted with outstretched arms as he gives tithes. This act is also repeated in a higher plane of illumination, where Abraham appears in the same pose, this time before St. John the Baptist (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 68r). In a typological context, one might expect a parallel scene featuring Abraham and Christ in the higher plane of illumination. However, this is not the case; instead, the focus is on St. John the Baptist, who is likely associated with the Levitical priesthood through his father, Zacharias. Thus, it appears that the illuminator is referencing Heb 7:4 and following, where the Levitical priesthood is embedded in a complex typological relationship through Abraham's prefigurative acts. Moreover, this typological association with St. John the Baptist seems to be introduced in the previous chapter by St. Paul, who speaks of the Lord's entrance "beyond the iconostasis," stating that: "Jesus entered for us as a forerunner, becoming high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6:19-20). Overall, the scene emphasizes the "tithe" that Abraham gives to Melchizedek and to John the Baptist, who blesses this merciful act. Nonetheless, this scene warrants a more extensive and in-depth analysis.

Abraham's hospitality toward the three angels (Fig. 2) is depicted in the illuminations specific to the Octateuch through two distinct scenes. In the first scene, Abraham welcomes them while prostrating before them, and in the second scene, the three angels are feasted under the Mamre oak. In both scenes, Abraham receives a blessing from the angel of the Lord, who is positioned among the three figures, which gives these scenes a Christological significance. Moreover, in the oldest preserved Octateuch, VAT. gr. 747, the angel of the Lord who bestows the blessing is shown with a halo containing a cross, like Christ, which leaves no room for misunderstanding (VAT. gr. 747, row 39r).

The Christological aspect of the two scenes, in which the angel of the Lord blesses Abraham while in the company of the three angels, is further emphasized in VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 73r.

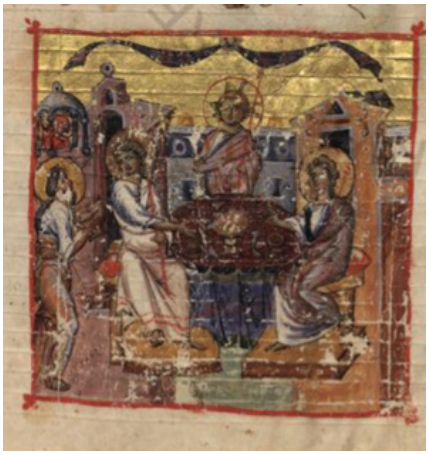

Fig. 2. Abraham and the Three Angels (VAT. gr. 747, tab 39r)

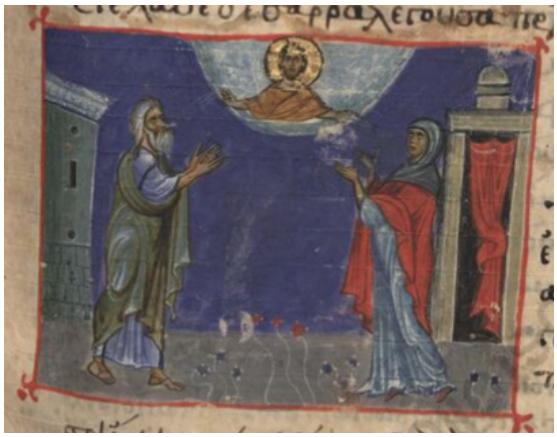

Fig. 3. Abraham and Sarah (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, tab 73r)

This manuscript introduces a new scene in which Christ Himself, represented by a heavenly nimbus, blesses Abraham and Sarah (Fig. 3). This moment likely refers

to the announcement made by one of the angels regarding the birth of a child through whom the Lord's promises would be fulfilled (Gn 18:10-15). Therefore, what Abraham witnesses at the Mamre oak tree can be interpreted as a theophany, with its mysteries to be fully revealed at the "fullness of time."

The Christological perspective on the moment of the appearance of the three angels at the Mamre Oak has not become definitively established in the broader understanding of the Church since the fourth century, when this scene began to reappear in Christian iconography. This ongoing ambivalence arises because many of the Church Fathers were reluctant to entirely abandon the Trinitarian interpretation, which they long regarded as a valid exegetical alternative (Bucur 2015, 253-259). Initially, the strongly Christological depiction of the three angels at the Mamre Oak, arranged in a line—as seen in the catacombs on the Via Latina (4th century), the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (5th century), and San Vitale in Ravenna (6th century)—began to shift towards another representation gradually. This new portrayal often features the angels arranged around a table, reinforcing the Trinitarian perspective (Bucur 2015, 261-3; Mihăilă 2017, 118). This ambivalence is also observable in the illuminations of the Byzantine Octateuch. For example, in the scene depicting the three angels around a table, the artist represents the central figure as Christ, featuring a cross in the halo (VAT. gr. 747, folio 39r). Later, there is a diminished focus on depicting Christ in a heavenly nimbus blessing Abraham and Sarah, as seen in another manuscript (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 73r). However, this later manuscript does not portray the scene with the three angels and the cross in the halo for the central figure (VAT. gr. 746 pt. 1, folio 72v), which could indicate a greater openness to the Trinitarian perspective. In summary, while the Christological perspective appears to dominate the illuminations in the Byzantine Octateuch, the Trinitarian viewpoint does not seem to be entirely overlooked. Paradoxically, the mimetic character of the three angels from the Mamre Oak scene has, over time, supported the reception and establishment of a Trinitarian interpretation in Orthodox Church iconography, mainly influenced by Andrei Rublev's icon after the fifteenth century (Bunge 2007, 52-56; Bucur 2015, 263).

In the Octateuch, the blessings of Abraham and Sarah serve as a pivotal scene, shaping the other Christological narratives that focus on Isaac as the central character. The scene depicting the sacrifice of Isaac is a classical representation (see Fig. 5) and, as we know, dates to the pre-Constantinian period of the Christian Church (Jensen 78-82).

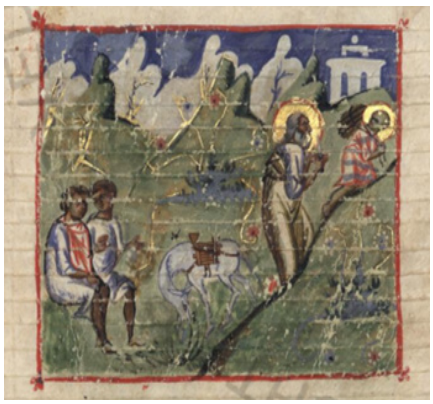

Fig. 4. Abraham and Isaac climbing the mountain (VAT. gr. 747, tab 43r)

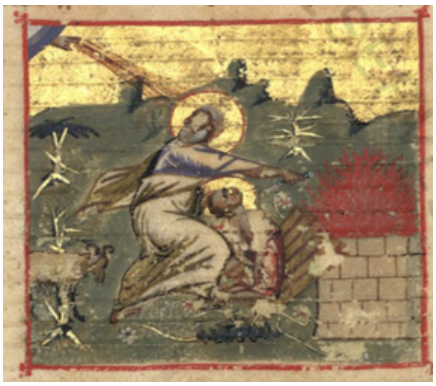

Fig. 5. Sacrificing Isaac (VAT. gr. 747, tab 43v)

We are particularly drawn to the scene that precedes the classical one, where Abraham is depicted with his son, separating from his servants to ascend Mount Moriah (Gn 22:5). In VAT gr. 746, part 1, tab 82r, we see Abraham placing the sacrificial wood on Isaac's shoulders. Meanwhile, VAT gr. 747, tab 43r illustrates the moment of their climb up the mountain, with Isaac appearing to kneel under the weight of the wood on his back (Fig. 4). The typological connection between the sacrificial wood and the Holy Cross, as well as the challenging ascent of the mountain and the journey to Golgotha, is evident. Isaac is presented in a typological context that reveals its full significance about

the Holy Passion and Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Like Abraham, Isaac also receives God's divine blessing (VAT gr. 746, part 1, folio 91v), with Christ appearing in a heavenly aura to bless him during the night, thus reaffirming the promises made to his father (Gn 26:24).

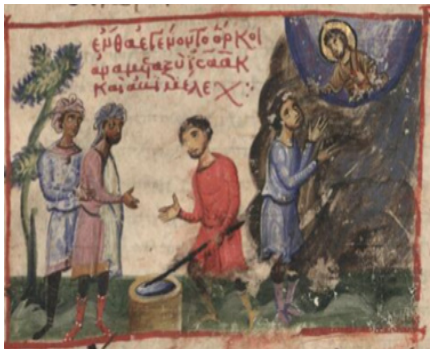

Fig. 6. Isaac receiving the divine blessing (VAT gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 91v)

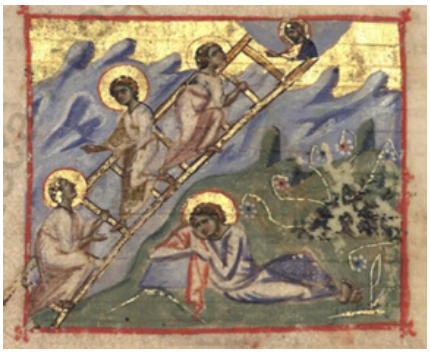

Fig. 7. Jacob's ladder (VAT gr. 747, folio 50r)

The cycle of scenes and illuminations dedicated to Jacob aims to emphasize the Jewish patriarch's role in the divine plan of salvation. It highlights how the fulfillment of divine promises is realized through Jacob and his family. This involvement is not solely due to God's election but also reflects Jacob's "struggle" to receive heavenly blessings. A key moment is Jacob's vision of the divine ladder, where he sees angels ascending and

descending (Gn 28:12-13) and finds Christ Himself at the top (VAT gr. 747, folio 50 r). Similarly, the cycle of scenes and illuminations dedicated to Joseph is equally rich, reflecting the characteristics of the Christian Church after the 4th century (Giannoulis 2017, 205). One notable image within these illuminations is the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers (Gn 37:28). This scene holds deep mimetic significance as it parallels the betrayal of Jesus by His disciples, also referred to as brothers. In the illustration, Joseph is drawn from the well with his arms outstretched, resembling the Holy Cross, and is sold by his brothers to a group of Ishmaelite traders while they sit at the table. This depiction of Joseph being sold suggests a foreshadowing of his eventual crucifixion, like how Christ was betrayed and handed over to the Romans by His companions after the Last Supper.

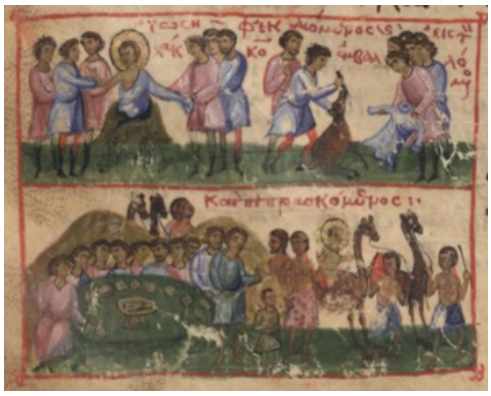

Fig. 8. Joseph sold by his brothers (VAT gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 116v)

The same mimetic character, with deep typological significance, can be observed in the scene where Moses and his family travel to Egypt at the Lord's command (Ex 4:18-20). Moses is depicted in the act of saying goodbye to his father-in-law, accompanied by his wife, Zipporah, and their two children—Gershon and Eliezer—who are sitting on donkeys, with their mother breastfeeding the youngest (Fig. 9). The resemblance to a New Testament biblical episode in the Gospel of Matthew, which describes the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (Mt 2:13-14), is striking. However, what seems to be anticipated here is not just the moment of departure, but the eventual return to the Holy Land, the Promised Land. Based on the biblical context, we see that Moses's

departure to Egypt occurs "after a long time has passed" since the death of the Egyptian king from whom he fled (Ex 2:23). Similarly, the evangelist Matthew specifies that the return to the "land of Israel" happens after Herod's death (Mt 2:19-21). Additionally, Zipporah's act of breastfeeding their child alludes to Mary's breastfeeding of the holy child upon their return from Egypt, a detail found in the apocryphal Gospels.

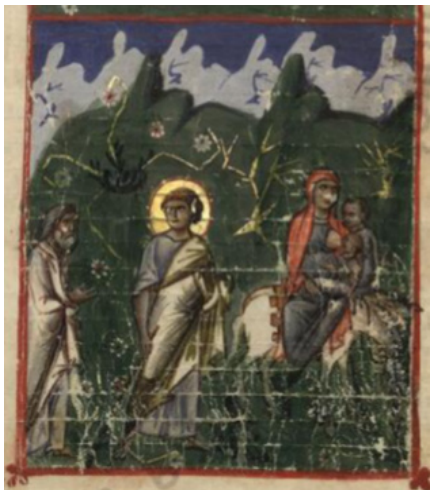

Fig. 9. Moses and his family
(VAT. gr. 747, folio 76v)

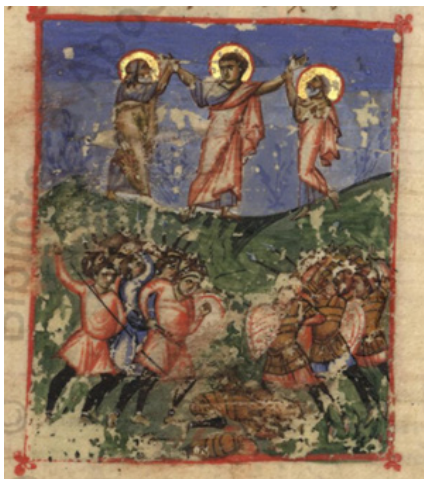

Fig. 10. Moses with his arms raised
(VAT. gr. 747, folio 94r)

Thus, this depiction suggests that Moses's journey with his family did not end in Egypt but culminated in the "land of Israel," the land promised to the patriarchs of the Israelite people. Through this illumination, Moses's family is assigned a typological significance parallel to that of Jesus Christ's family.

Several well-known scenes that evoke a Christological character include the depiction of Moses on the mountain with outstretched arms, supported by Aaron and Hur, paralleling the image of the Holy Cross. At the same time, Joshua fights against the Amalekites (Ex 17:10-12). This scene serves as a symbol of victory over enemies. Another significant scene is that of the brazen serpent raised in the wilderness (Nm 21:8-9), which, like the Holy Cross, represents the healing of sin.

While these scenes suggest a Christological interpretation, those that involve the messianic prophecies made by the prophet Balaam and Moses himself have a more explicit Christological character. For instance, Balaam, riding a donkey, is halted by an angel (often identified as the Archangel Michael), who confronts him with a raised sword (Nm 22:21-35). In this context, Christ is visually represented within a celestial nimbus (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 175r) (Fig. 11) and is the one who would later be foretold by Balaam (Nm 24:17). Similarly, Moses foresees Christ for his people (Dt 18:15; 18:18), and as in the previous illumination, he is depicted in a heavenly nimbus (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 273v) (Fig. 12).

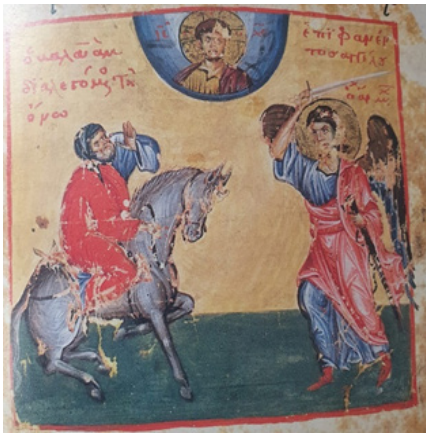

Fig. 11. Valaam stopped by the angel (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 175r)

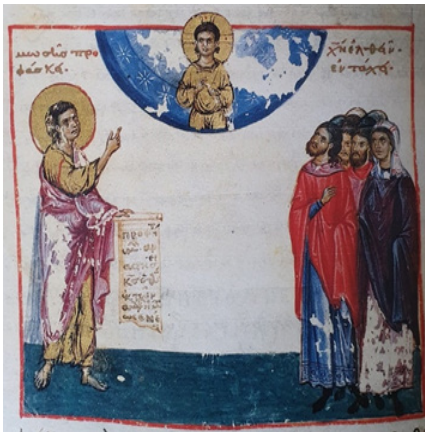

Fig. 12 Moses prophesying (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 273v)

The final illumination in the Book of Ruth, which also serves as a conclusion to the Octateuch, depicts Boaz and Ruth lying on the ground with a vibrant field of vegetation between them (Fig. 13). According to the Japanese scholar Mika Takiguchi, the illustrated cycle of the Book of Ruth could have concluded either with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth or the birth of Obed (Takaguchi 2007, 223). However, the choice to depict Boaz and Ruth in this prone position not only reflects the narrative of the Book of Ruth but also hints at the future events explored in the Books of Kings. Their posture foreshadows Jesse, who is similarly represented in iconography lying on the ground, from whom the family tree of our Lord Jesus Christ is said to emerge (Takaguchi 2007, 225). While it is believed that the iconographic origin of the Tree of Jesse should be traced back to the Christian West, its later representations, particularly during the era of the Palaiologos, do not rule out the possibility that this theme was known in Byzantium much earlier, as suggested by the Octateuch.

What is certain is that the depiction of Boaz and Ruth lying on the ground aims to foreshadow the Davidic lineage, which will culminate in the birth of Christ. This illustration seeks to highlight the royal lineage of Christ, emphasizing the typological relationship with genealogical lines. This is particularly evident in the genealogy presented by the Evangelist Matthew (Mt 1:1-17), as opposed to that in the Gospel of Luke, which traces the descent back to Adam and Eve, the first parents of humanity (Lk 3:23-38). Furthermore, it is worth noting that there is no discernible correspondence

in the illuminations of the Octateuch between the scene of Boaz and Ruth and those depicting Adam and Eve separately, lying on the ground. Thus, the final scene of the Octateuch does not intend to conclude a complete cycle of illustrations related to the book and its various interpretations. Instead, it seeks to preserve and cultivate the "mystery of the search for Christ" that is hidden within the Scriptures.

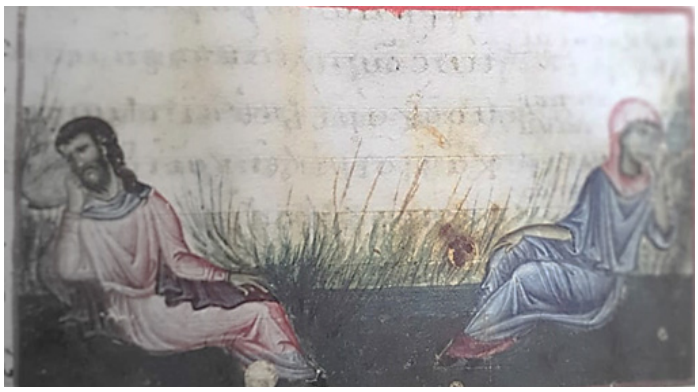

Fig. 13. Boaz and Ruth (Codex 602, Vatopedus, folio 465r)

Conclusions

The illuminations of the Byzantine Octateuch are notable for their ability to reveal the exegetical tradition of the Church of the East through visual expression. These illuminations primarily serve a didactic and pedagogical purpose. However, they also possess a secondary anagogic dimension. The illuminations complement one another, forming a cohesive whole designed to uncover and affirm the truths of faith. Consequently, they transcend mere didactic or decorative roles, functioning instead as tools for theological interpretation. They offer a visual reading of Scripture that emphasizes the mysterious presence of Christ in the Old Testament texts.

Artists utilized typology as the primary key for visual interpretation, allowing viewers to understand Old Testament events and characters as prefigurations of Christ's saving work. Thus, these illuminations synthesize the biblical narrative to enhance its theological significance, guiding viewers toward a deeper discovery of Scripture's spiritual meaning. They strike a balance between fidelity to the biblical account and theological interpretation, alternating between descriptive scenes and those that highlight Christological presence, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the hospitality at the oak

of Mamre, and the raising of the bronze serpent—all of which are foundational elements of patristic typology. As a result, these images serve as more than mere illustrations; they act as a visual guide that directs readers to Christ, the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies.

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The Cross in the Old Testament (a look through the Paroimias for Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord)

Abstract

The paper examines the profound connection between the Old Testament prefigurations and the Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross, underscoring the profound theological and liturgical significance of the Cross in the Christian tradition. Through the typologies of the tree at Marah, the uplifted hands of Moses, the crossed hands of Jacob, and the Tree of Life, the Church underscores the continuity of salvation history, showing the Cross as both a fulfillment of Old Testament imagery and a symbol of redemption. Liturgical texts and hymnography enrich this understanding, presenting the Cross not only as an instrument of Christ's Passion but also as a source of life, grace, and eternal salvation. The references to cypress, pine, and cedar further root the veneration of the Cross in Scripture and tradition, drawing connections between the material creation and its sanctification through Christ. Ultimately, the Feast serves as a call to worship and contemplation, urging the faithful to recognize the Cross as the ultimate expression of God's love and a beacon of hope for humanity, uniting past revelations with the present life of the Church and the promise of eternal life.

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Introduction

The Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord "urges all of creation to praise the immaculate Passion of the One Who was lifted up

thereon" (*stichera at "Lord, I Call", tone 2*). At the beginning of each church year, the Church brings out the Cross of Christ for veneration, mirroring the worship of the Holy Cross that took place in the 4th century following its discovery by St. Helena, Equal-to-the-Apostles (see more about the establishment of the feast and the formation of the service can be found in: Мирковић 1961, 61-68; Архимандрит Авксентий 2012, 315). Since ancient times, the Cross of Christ has been proclaimed and presented through images and prefigurations. As St. Gregory Palamas explains, if it were not for the power of the Cross, humanity would never have had the opportunity to be reconciled with God (Свт. Григорій Палама 1993, 105).

At the vespers of the feast, three paroimias are read, and the entire service for the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord is rich in Old Testament examples. "Christ's Cross was among our forefathers before it came into being, because its mystery was working in them," says St. Gregory Palamas in his homily (Свт. Григорій Палама 1993, 105).

Moses – water at Marah and the battle with Amalek

The first reading[1] is from Ex 15:22–27; 16:1. It recounts the Israelites' journey through the desert on their way from Egypt to Sinai. Under Moses' leadership, the people arrive at Marah, where they find the water to be bitter. Following God's command, Moses throws a tree into the water, making it sweet and drinkable. The people then continue their journey and reach the abundant springs of water at the oasis of Elim.

Suppose we focus on the Old Testament imagery used in the worship for the feast. In that case, we find the tree as a foreshadowing of the Cross, the crossed hands of Moses during the battle with Amalek, the crossed hands of Jacob in the blessing of his sons, and the antithesis of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree (the Cross). Within this typological framework, the first paroimia is also placed, recounting a miracle involving a tree and the transformation of evil (bitter water) into good (sweet water):

> Not suffering the deadly bitterness of the tree to continue, O Lord, You have utterly blotted it out through the Cross. Wherefore, wood also once destroyed the bitterness of the waters of Marah, prefiguring the working of the Cross, which all the powers of Heaven magnify (*Ode Nine, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

The turning of the bitter waters at Marah is also interpreted as a foreshadowing of the conversion of the pagans to the piety of the Cross[2].

In Chapter 86 of *The Dialogue with Trypho*, St. Justin Martyr interprets the staff of Moses, with which he parted the sea, the tree thrown into the waters at Marah, the staff of Jacob, and the tree that the prophet Elisha cast into the Jordan River as prefigurations of Christ and His Cross (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 274-276.)[3]. In St. Justin Martyr's exegesis, these prefigurations can be found, which later appear repeatedly in the writings of the Church Fathers, as well as in hymnography. One such image is the uplifted hands of Moses during the battle with Amalek (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 282; see also Свт. Григорій Палама 1993, 105-120), which is also the most frequently referenced image of the Cross in the worship for the Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord.

The battle with the Amalekites takes place after the miracle of the water at Marah and the stay at the oasis of Elim, in Rephidim, on the way to Sinai. Before the battle, Moses and Aaron climbed a nearby mountain:

> And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun (Ex 17:11-12, NKJV).

The prefiguration is clearly explained several times in the hymnography:

> Moses once prefigured you, stretching his hands out toward Heaven, and prevailing mightily over tyrant Amalek... (*stichera at "Lord, I Call"*);
>
> Prefiguring the power of Your precious Cross, O Christ, Moses turned back the adversary Amalek in the wilderness of Sinai; for when he stretched out his hands, forming the figure of the Cross, the people prevailed... (*Glory, Fourth Tone, by Anatolius*);
>
> Your precious Cross, which Moses prefigured in himself of old, defeated Amalek and put him to flight (*Glory, Tone Four, by John the Monk*);
>
> Of old did Moses foreshow in himself a type of the spotless Passion, when he stood between two sacred men of God; for he figured forth the Cross with his hands outstretched, and raised up trophies in the fight, destroying the dominion of the pestilent Amalek. Hence, let us praise in song Christ our God; for He truly is glorified (*Ode One, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Jacob and Joseph's sons

A similar image used in the hymnography for the feast is Jacob's hands placed crosswise on the heads of Joseph's sons. During the famine in Canaan, Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt, where, on his deathbed, Jacob gathered his twelve sons, who would become the progenitors of the twelve tribes. He foretold their future (Gn 49:1-33). In *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, St. John of Damascus writes: "Jacob, when he worshipped the top of Joseph's staff (Gn 47:31, LXX), was the first to image the Cross, and when he blessed his sons with crossed hands, he made most clearly the sign of the Cross." (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

The prefiguration of Jacob's crossed hands is referenced several times during the feast:

> Prefigurating Your Cross, O Christ, the Patriarch Jacob, when he gave the blessing to his descendants, laid his hands crosswise upon their heads... (verse of the litia),
>
> The crossing of the Patriarch Jacob's hands, at the blessing of his children, revealed beforehand the mighty symbol of Your Cross… (*verse of the litia by Cyprian Studite*),
>
> Bowed down with age and spent with sickness, Jacob rose upright when he crossed his hands, showing the power of the life-bearing Cross. For God, Who was nailed upon it in the flesh, has written anew the oldness of the letter of the shadowy Law, and has driven away the soul-destroying disease of error

is sung in the sixth ode of the canon of the feast.

Other Old Testament Prefiguration

St. John of Damascus also identifies other Old Testament prefigurations of the Cross:

> The tree of life which was planted by God in Paradise pre-figured this precious Cross. For since death was by a tree, it was fitting that a tree should bestow life and resurrection. Jacob, when He worshipped the top of Joseph's staff, was the first to image the Cross, and when he blessed his sons with crossed hands he made most clearly the sign of the cross. Likewise also did Moses' rod, when it smote the sea in the figure of the cross and saved Israel, while it overwhelmed Pharaoh (cf. Ex 14:16) in the depths; likewise also the hands stretched out crosswise and routing Amalek (cf. Ex 17:11); and the bitter water made sweet by a tree (cf. Ex 15:25), and the rock rent and pouring forth streams of water

> (cf. Ex 17:6), and the rod that meant for Aaron the dignity of the high priesthood (cf. Nm 17:8-9): and the serpent lifted in triumph on a tree as though it were dead (cf. Nm 21:9), the tree bringing salvation to those who in faith saw their enemy dead, just as Christ was nailed to the tree in the flesh of sin which yet knew no sin. The mighty Moses cried, You will see your life hanging on the tree before your eyes, and Isaiah likewise, I have spread out my hands all the day unto a faithless and rebellious people (Is 65:2). (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

Many of these prefigurations are incorporated into the hymnography for the feast. The Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 14:16) and the miracles accompanying the Israelites' journey through the desert are frequently mentioned:

> A Cross did Moses inscribe, when with an upright stroke of his rod he divided the Red Sea for Israel, who went on foot; then he turned and smote the sea, once again uniting it o'er Pharaoh's chariots, with transverse stroke portraying the invincible weapon (*first ode, canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Live-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Another prominent prefiguration is the rod with the bronze serpent erected by Moses. After the Israelites repented from their grumbling, Moses made a bronze serpent and placed it on a pole: "and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Nm 21:9). The Lord Jesus Christ Himself related this prefiguration to His Crucifixion: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should [a]not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15). The Church collects these Old Testament lessons in its worship:

> Once Moses placed on a pole that which cured the plague of the serpents' deadly poisoned bite and rescued from the death it brought; and on wood that formed a cross, crosswise did he bind the serpent creeping on the earth, by this sign overcoming the affliction and suffering (*second ode, canon of Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

St. Andrew of Crete, in his sermons on the Elevation of the Cross, echoes St. John of Damascus, revealing further prefigurations. Among those that we repeatedly meet in other patristic writings and in the liturgy for the feast, he also indicates Isaac,

who carries the wood for the burnt offering (Gn 22), the staff of Moses, which turns into a snake (Ex 4:2-5; 7:10-12), the pillar of fire that led the Israelites during the Exodus (Ex 13:21-22) (Свт. Андрей, архіеп. Критскій 1897, 1297-1301). In another of his writings, dedicated to the feast, St. Andrew of Crete again lists numerous examples of the Cross, among which he indicates the battle of Joshua at Gibeon and "thus showing the elevation of the Cross and foreshadowing its ascension to the Sun of Glory" (Свт. Андрей, архіеп. Критскій 1897, 1297-1301). At the battle in the Gibeon Valley, at the prayer of Joshua, the sun stood still until Israel defeated its enemies:

> So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped, Till the people had revenge Upon their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. And there has been no day like that, before it or after it, that the Lord heeded the voice of a man; for the Lord fought for Israel (Jos 10:13-14, NKJV).

The prefigure (type) is clearly found in the hymnography:

> Jesus the son unfair sketched out beforetime the type and pattern of Your Cross in mystic figure, when his hands were extended like a cross, my Saviour. The sun stood still in the heaven, till he destroyed the enemies that withstood You, the Mighty God…(*glory, tone 8*).

The second paroimia is from Prov. 3:11-18. The reading equates Wisdom with the tree of life, which is the Cross (Archimandrite Ephrem 2008, 44). Saint Justin the Martyr refers to the tree of life planted in paradise, stating:

> Hear, then, how this Man, of whom the Scriptures declare that He will come again in glory after His crucifixion, was symbolized both by the tree of life, which was said to have been planted in paradise, and by those events which should happen to all the just. (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 274-276).

Saint John of Damascus calls the Cross of Christ "the tree of eternal life" and "a precious and august tree," (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 134) beginning his extensive exposition of the types of the Cross with the tree of life: "The tree of life which was planted by God in Paradise prefigured this precious Cross. For since death came by a

tree, it was fitting that life and resurrection should be bestowed by a tree." (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

In the worship of the Church, the connection to the first chapters of Genesis is clearly emphasized - particularly the commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:17) and the expulsion of Adam from Paradise: "And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Gn 3:22). Adam was cast out to prevent him from tasting the tree and living forever, but now, through the Tree of the Cross, he tastes eternal life. The tree once planted by God in Paradise (Gn 2:9) now becomes the tree of salvation. Through the tree of the Cross, the Lord cleanses the world from sin, raises up the outcasts, and redeems humanity "for the theft of the forbidden fruit" (*stichera at "Lord, I Call"*).

The typological interpretation of the tree of life as a type of the Cross of Christ is further strengthened by the testimony of the St. Apostle and Evangelist John: "ow in the place where He was crucified there was a garden" (Jn 19:41). The tree of life is in Eden, and the Tree (i.e., the Cross), which opens heaven, is also in a garden. This is echoed in Revelation: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev 2:7). Because of a tree the first parents were expelled from paradise, now through the Tree the Savior opens paradise to the thief who is chained with Him.

This antithetical typology of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" and the Tree of the Cross continues in the Church's hymnography[4]. The Church calls us to worship the "blessed Tree" through which eternal righteousness comes: "For he that by a tree beguiled our forefather Adam is himself ensnared by the Cross," and "because of the tree, redemption should come through the Passion of Him Who is passionless" (*"Lord, I Call," Glory, tone 2*). At Matins, it is sung:

> Once in Paradise, the tree stripped me of divine grace; by tasting it, the enemy killed me. But the Tree of the Cross, bearing for men the Garment of Life, rose above the earth, and the whole world was filled with all joy *(sessional hymn after the Polyeleos, Tone 8*).

The prefigurations of the Cross, interwoven in the tradition and liturgy of the Church for specific feasts, extend into worship and theology. For example, in his sermon on the Nativity of Christ, St. Clement of Ohrid relates both the tree and God's Wisdom to Christ:

> Having banished the voice that heralded death, the Archangel revealed to her that her Son was God, the eternal King, who wrought salvation in the midst of the earth, as it was in Paradise by the tree of life. 'Through the tree,' he said, 'is life.' God's Wisdom is the Son of Mary, and there is sweet fruit for all who cling to Him, as in the Lord. (Св. Климент Охридски 1970, 170)

The third paroimia (Is 60:11-16) is from the final part of the book of the Holy Prophet Isaiah and heralds the glorious messianic era, when Jerusalem will be exalted due to the events that occurred there. Nations will stream to the holy city, and its gates will remain perpetually open. This prophecy is also read on Great Saturday, prefigurating the gathering of peoples to the city of the Resurrection and the ever-open doors of Christ's Church.

The specific reason for including this pericope from Isaiah as the paroimia for the Exaltation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord lies in its reference to cypress, pine, and cedar, which glorify the footstool of God's feet. The cross is likewise viewed as the footstool of God's feet, as echoed in texts that reference Ps 98:5 (or Ps 99:5 in the NKJV): "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool – He is holy." This verse serves as the prokeimenon for the Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord. Similarly, Solomon's temple was adorned with cypress, pine, and cedar, as mentioned in 2 Chronicles 2:8: "Also send me cedar, cypress, and algum logs from Lebanon, for I know that your servants have skill to cut timber in Lebanon."

According to the tradition, the cross of Christ (Archimandrite Ephrem 2008, 44) was made from cypress, pine, and cedar. This is reflected in hymns of the Church, such as: "The Church sings to You, Christ God, in pine, cedar, and cypress, as we worship You..." (*sessional hymn, tone 7 on 19th September*). During the Great Lent, particularly in the fourth week following the Sunday of the Holy Cross, hymnography often refers to cypress, pine, and cedar in connection with the cross of Christ. Examples include: "You were crucified on pine, cedar, and cypress, O Son of God..." (*sessional hymn, tone 4, friday of the fourth week of Great Lent*), and "As a cypress of charity, as a cedar of fragrant faith, as a pine of true love, let us worship the Lord's Cross..." (*Ode 7, Canon on Wednesday of the fourth week of Great Lent*). Similarly, in the Resurrection canon, Tone 2, and throughout the Octoechos[5], Christ is praised as the One Who raised His flesh upon cypress, pine, and cedar. In the canon for the Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord, all trees are called to rejoice, as their nature has been sanctified through the cross. Ode 9 proclaims:

"Let all the trees of the forest rejoice, for their nature has been sanctified by Him Who planted them in the beginning, even Christ, Who was stretched out upon the Tree." (*ode nine, canon of Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Conclusion

The Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord stands as a bridge between the past, present, and future, linking the Old Testament prefigurations with the fulfillment in Christ and the ongoing work of salvation in the Church. Through its liturgical richness, it invites the faithful to a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Cross and its central role in Christian faith. Ultimately, the feast serves as a call to worship and contemplation, urging the faithful to recognize the Cross as the ultimate expression of God's love and a beacon of hope for humanity, uniting past revelations with the present life of the Church and the promise of eternal life.

Notes

[1] This pericope is also read on the Feast of Theophany and is connected to Baptism and the Cross: during Theophany, mass baptisms were performed. For those about to begin a new life in Christ, the Church reveals the power of the Cross (the "Tree"), which will transform their lives. During the sacrament of Baptism, the priest immerses the cross into the sanctified water, transforming it into the water of a new and personal exodus toward salvation.

[2] "In ancient times, Moses transformed the bitter springs in the desert through the wood, foretelling the conversion of the Gentiles to the piety of the Cross" (First troparion, fourth ode, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord).

[3] The typological interpretation in the liturgy is presented in the seventh ode of the Canon for Wednesday of the fourth week of Great Lent.

[4] The topic is also referred to the seventh ode of the Canon for the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord.

[5] See Canon, tone 2 on Wednesday; Canon, tone 3 on Wednesday; seventh ode of the Canon for friday, tone 3; sessional hymn on Wednesday, tone 7; fourth ode of the Canon for Friday, tone 8.

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"Who is the King of glory?" Exegetical and Theological Reflections on Psalm 24:7-10

Abstract

The study explores the rich liturgical and theological elements of Psalm 24. This psalm depicts a triumphant procession towards Jerusalem, culminating in a cultic dialogue at the gates of the sanctuary. This dialogue, which features a call-and-response between those outside the gates and those inside, emphasizes Yahweh's identity as the "King of Glory." This theme is discussed in different theological contexts throughout the study. The investigation aims to establish the historical backgound for the psalm's ceremony while also exploring the theological implications of referring to Yahweh as both "the Lord mighty in battle" and "the Lord of Hosts." Through detailed exegesis and comparisons with other Scriptural texts, the study argues for a nuanced understanding of divine kingship in the Old Testament. Additionally, the study examines how the early Christian Church Fathers interpreted these passages, often seeing them as foreshadowing the ascension of Christ – referred to as "the King of Glory" – to heaven. By integrating both Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions, this study presents a comprehensive analysis that underscores the theological complexity of these verses and their lasting significance in religious thought and liturgy.

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Introduction

Psalm 24 depicts a procession heading toward Jerusalem. As the crowd approaches the sanctuary gates, an entrance ceremony takes place, characterized by a cultic dialogue, in anticipation of the solemn entry of the King of glory (Kraus 1993, 311). The people call out for the gates to be opened so that the King of glory (Heb. *Melek hakkāḇôḏ*) can enter: "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (Ps 24:7, 9). This request is made twice, each time followed by the question from those behind the gates: "Who is the King of glory?" The response from outside the gates identifies the King of Glory first as "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!" and then as "the Lord of hosts," gradually revealing His identity (Ps 24:8,10).

The ceremony of entry involves bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the sanctuary. By carrying the Ark, which symbolizes the divine presence, the people in procession affirm that Yahweh, the King of Glory, is among them and desires to dwell in His holy place. This act signifies that from the sanctuary, He may demonstrate His sovereignty over Zion and Israel (cf. Ps 46:4-7; 84:4-10)[1].

This study aims to analyze verses 7-10 of the psalm to offer answers to the following questions: Can we establish the historical context of the entrance ceremony? Who is the "King of glory" from a theological perspective, and what does this title signify in the context of the Old Testament? Do the two descriptions given in verses 8 and 10 – "Lord mighty in war" and "Lord of hosts" – express the same theological concept, or do they delineate two distinct attributes of Yahweh? Finally, how was this text received in the Tradition of the Church? To answer these questions, this study will provide an analysis of the psalm's structure to identify a possible historical context. It will reflect on divine kingship as portrayed in the Old Testament, analyze the two formulas that identify the King of glory, and examine how the theological image of Psalm 24:7-10 was received in the Patristic Tradition of the Church.

The structure, content, and possible historical context of Psalm 24

Psalm 24 is divided into three sections[2]. The first part is a hymn of praise, proclaiming that all creation belongs to the Lord (Psalm 24:1-2)[3]. Yahweh governs the entire world and all its inhabitants as their Creator. Among all of God's creative acts (Gn 1:1-31), the Psalmist highlights a specific one: that He established the earth over the seas (Heb. *Yammim*) and set it upon the rivers (Heb. *Neharot*). This assertion, as many

biblical scholars note, is rooted in a cosmological understanding from the Ancient Near East, where it was believed that the earth is supported by foundations above the seas (cf. Job 38:4-7)[4].

The following two sections have a ritualistic character and are structured as a dialogue between the laity and the priests. This dialogue occurs in three stages: question, answer, and blessing. The laity approaches the entrance of the sanctuary and poses the question: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in his holy place?"[5] The priest answered and pronounced the necessary conditions for the one who wished to enter: the one "who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully" will be allowed to enter the holy place of the Lord[6]. The essential interior conditions for standing before the Lord are purity of heart and love for God and neighbors (cf. Hos 6:6). The priest then offers a blessing for entry: "He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation". This means that a person who fulfills these conditions is permitted to enter and remain in the presence of God[7].

The third part of the psalm unfolds as a cultic dialogue. The people arrive at the sanctuary, carrying the Ark of the Covenant in procession, and request that the gates be opened for the King of Glory to enter: "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (v. 7). From within the sanctuary, a question is posed: "Who is the King of Glory?" In response, Yahweh's name is proclaimed, and His strength is affirmed; He is described as "strong and mighty, mighty in battle" (v. 8). The gates do not open immediately. The people again plead for them to open, and the question is repeated from inside: "Who is the King of Glory?" The definitive answer reveals God's name: "Lord of Hosts (Heb. *Yahweh Sabaoth*), this is the King of glory". This statement serves as the climactic expression that the psalmist reserved for the conclusion (Gunkel 1903, 369-70). The divine name holds inherent power, and its utterance highlights the divine presence among the pilgrims standing before the gates[8]. Consequently, the gates of the city or temple, which had been closed, open at the mention of the name *Yahweh Sabaoth*.

The gates before which people stand are referred to as "ancient" or "eternal" (Heb. *ʿôlām*; Gr. *aionios*), and they open by being lifted[9]. In the Masoretic Text, the gates are personified: "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors". This highlights that they are commanded to rise for the great King entering, without the need for gatekeepers [10]. In the Septuagint, the leaders are instructed to raise the gates,

with the phrase "raise the gates, O rulers of yours". In this context, the rulers refers to the priests responsible for opening the doors (Clements 2015, 121-2).

Identifying the gates mentioned can offer insight into the potential historical context of the psalm's composition; however, it is difficult to link it to a specific event definitively. Some scholars suggest that the reference is to the gates of Jerusalem, while others believe it pertains to the gates of the temple.

Most scholars believe that King David wrote the psalm in the context of bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Zion (2 Sam 6:1-19). During this event, David organized a festive procession from the house of Abinadab to the gates of Jerusalem. This interpretation suggests that the "ancient gates" refer to the gates of Jerusalem, which David captured from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5:6-7). Additionally, the use of the divine name *Yahweh Sabaoth* in connection with the Ark of the Covenant supports this view, as it aligns with the cultic tradition that began in Shiloh and was later adopted in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 4:4; 2 Kgs 6:2). For these reasons, this framework appears to be the most appropriate context for understanding the historical background in which the psalm was composed (Sumpter 2015, 176-182; Davidson 1998, 87; Hengstenberg 1863, 411-413). However, over time, other interpretations have also been proposed.

Rashi asserts that King David composed the psalm for Solomon to recite during the consecration of the temple in Jerusalem, specifically during the procession when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to the Temple to be placed in the Holy of Holies (see 1 Kgs 8; 2 Chr 6:1-42). The "gates" mentioned in the psalm refer to those of the temple or the entrance to the Holy of Holies. They are described as "eternal" due to their holiness. It should be noted that these cannot refer to ancient gates since the construction of the temple had just been completed[11]. In that solemn setting, Solomon would initiate the cultic dialogue by requesting that the doors be opened. Rashi points out that Solomon appeals to the covenant that God established with his father, David, when he makes this request (2 Pt 6:42; cf. 2 Kgs 7:8-15) (Gruber 2004, 267).

Diodorus of Tarsus illustrates that Psalm 24 offers encouragement to the Israelites returning to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile[12]. The concluding section of the psalm demonstrates the joy of those returning from exile as they engage in an antiphonal dialogue at the gates of Jerusalem. These gates are called eternal because they have remained closed for far too long. God, depicted as King, leads them into the city, having cared for them during their time in Babylon, liberated them from exile, and granted them the freedom to return to Jerusalem. Additionally, Diodorus

of Tarsus notes that some commentators have interpreted this antiphonal dialogue as a reference to Christ the Lord and His ascension into heaven. He acknowledges the value of this interpretation while also recognizing the historical message of the psalm (Diodorus of Tarsus 2005, 75-77).

Some exegetes, such as Allen P. Ross, suggest that Psalm 24 describes the Israelites return from a victorious battle against the Canaanites. In this interpretation, the army and the people go to the sanctuary, praising God for the victory they have achieved. They carry the ark of the covenant to the temple, which symbolizes the presence of God who accompanied them on the battlefield (Ross 2011, 575-576)[13]. However, this interpretation, while rooted in Israel's history, appears insufficient. The psalm references the coming or entry of the King of Glory, rather than His return. It seems that the Lord is entering those gates for the first time (Hengstenberg 1863, 412). Additionally, there are no direct references to armed conflict, nor are there elements indicating a specific military situation. Instead, the solemn, poetic, and ritualistic language evokes a liturgical celebration, recalling the entirety of God's interventions on behalf of His chosen people in a theological manner. The ceremony described in Psalm 24 represents Yahweh's entry into the sanctuary through the ark, as well as a remembrance of His mighty deeds throughout the history of salvation (Wambacq 1947, 163).

The interpretations of Psalm 24 suggest that its context relates to the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem during King David's reign (2 Kgs 6:12-19). This event marks the establishment of Jerusalem as a unique place of worship and serves as a reminder of the victories the chosen people experienced with Yahweh's assistance in battles. Over time, the psalm became part of temple worship and was used as a hymn of praise to Yahweh. Scholars believe it was recited during a feast that celebrated the kingship of Yahweh. The Ark was at the center of the procession that ascended to the temple, reaffirming annually that Yahweh is the supreme King of Israel (Mowinckel 1967, 169-82)[14].

"The King of Glory". On the kingship of Yahweh (Ps 24:8,10)

Psalm 24, when considered in its entirety, articulates a central theological motif: the divine kingship. The Lord is referred to as מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד (*Melek hakkāḇôḏ*), the King par excellence of creation (verses 1-2) and of Israel (verses 7-10). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term *melek* means "king" or "monarch" of a people, designating the human leader at the head of the chosen people who fulfills military (1 Kgs 12:23-24), judicial

(1 Kgs 3:16-28), or religious (2 Kgs 23) responsibilities. More broadly, the king is seen as the "shepherd" responsible for the well-being of the people (2 Chr 6:6). While the Old Testament sometimes refers to the Israelite king specifically as "the king of Israel" (1 Sam 26:20; 2 Sam 6:20), it never labels him as "king of kings" or "the great king". This distinction exists because, in Israel, the earthly king was considered the anointed one of Yahweh, the Heavenly King. The king's entire reign was to be grounded in the Law and the fear of God (Dt 17:18-19) (J.A. Soggin 1997, 672-9; Brettler 1989, 30).

The Old Testament frequently refers to God as "King" utilizing metaphorical language that enriches the faith of the chosen people. The metaphor "God is King" is particularly prominent in poetic and prophetic writings, which employ figurative language (Brettler 1989, 23-8). When applied to Yahweh, the Hebrew term *melek* highlights divine attributes that extend beyond traditional notions of kingship. As King, the God of Israel demonstrates His power in warfare (Ps 24; Zech 14), acts as the protector of His chosen people and the city of Zion (Ps 45:5; Jer 8:19), and serves as the Judge of Israel (Is 33:22). In certain passages where God is referred to as King, He is also depicted as a "shepherd" who cares for His flock, Israel (Mic 2:12-13).

The expressions "Yahweh is King" differ significantly from those that describe human kingship. While both the "Yahweh-King" and earthly kings share certain attributes, the qualities of God are expressed superlatively, often in a uniquely applicable way. Therefore, God's kingship is superior to that of human kings. Human kings typically construct houses, palaces (1 Kgs 7:1; 22:39), temples (1 Kgs 6), or fortresses (1 Kgs 12:25). In contrast, God, as King, is the creator of the entire world and everything within it. He reigns by constantly manifesting His divine providence (Ps 89:11). Yahweh is not only the "shepherd" of Israel but also "the one who made Israel" (Ps 149:2) and "the creator of Israel" (Is 43:15). He is referred to as the "King of Israel" (Is 44:6), yet His sovereignty extends to all nations (Ps 46:8). His power is unmatched by any human authority. As King, God demonstrates His strength in some of the battles fought by Israel (Jer 10:6-10). From an eschatological perspective, His power will be fully revealed with the establishment of eternal peace. King Yahweh reigns over all creation; He is the "King of heaven" (Dn 4:37) and the "king of all the earth" (Ps 47:7). His kingdom encompasses not only the transcendent realm but also the "kingdom of creation."

Psalm 24 illustrates that Yahweh's kingship is rooted in the act of creation (verses 1-2) and is affirmed in historical events (verses 7-10). From a cosmological perspective, God as King, creates the world and establishes order within it. Historically,

He is recognized by the people as a strong and powerful King who has demonstrated His might at various moments throughout history (Craigie 1983, 213).

The pilgrims proclaim that *Melek hakkāḇôḏ* ("King of Glory") will enter through the city's gates. This phrase, found only in this context, emphasizes that the One who enters is the supreme King of creation and of His chosen people. It is only of Him that we can say He is the King of Glory, as similarly stated in Ps 29:3, where He is referred to as the "God of Glory." The divine glory[15] associated with the majesty and power demonstrated during the Exodus from Egypt – through miracles and victories over the Egyptians – led to the acknowledgment of God's kingship: "The Lord will reign forever and ever" (Ex 15:18). Over time, God has revealed His glory in various events, prompting the Israelites to reaffirm His kingship (Craigie 1983, 213) continually.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that Yahweh is called the "King of Glory" because Israel not only witnessed His glory but also partook of it to the extent of His justice. God shares His glory: He granted the king of Israel His throne, gave Elijah His chariot and horses of fire, and placed His scepter in Moses' hand to lead the people. God covered Israel with His royal robe, which represents His power. Unlike human kings, who would never allow anyone to use their name or title, God showed Moses that he would be "god" to Pharaoh (Ex 7:1). Therefore, God is called the "King of Glory" because He offers His glory to the righteous (Feuer 1996, 303).

"The Lord, mighty in battle". On God's power in battles (Ps 24:8)

From behind the gates, the cultic question is asked: "Who is the King of glory"? And the first answer offered by those in front of the gates is:

יְהוָה עִזּוּז וְגִבּוֹר יְהוָה גִּבּוֹר מִלְחָמָה
(*Yahwe ʿizzuz we-gibbôr, Yahwe gibbôr milḥāmāh*).

The king of glory is Yahweh, and the divine attribute emphasized in this verse is His power. The two adjectives, *ʿizzuz* and *gibbôr*, particularly highlight the strength exhibited in warfare. The term *ʿizzuz*, which is rarely found in the Hebrew text, signifies strength – especially strength in battle – and, in relation to Yahweh, underscores His perfect power (see Ps 144:6; Is 43:17). The other term, *gibbôr*, is a frequently used epithet in the Old Testament that refers to a "warrior," "brave person" or "hero" who is strong in battle. It can refer to an individual or to a group of people (*gibbôrim*) experienced in

warfare (1 Sam 17:51; 2 Sam 20:7), and it also describes God as the Mighty One who fights for His people (Is 10:21). In Psalm 24, Yahweh, the King of glory, is given the title *gibbôr milḥāmāh* ("valiant" or "hero in war") because He has demonstrated His strength in battle throughout Israel's history. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that, Israel experiences the power of their God primarily in warfare:

> at first Israel experienced this might of its God above all in war. Yahweh has the power of nature as his helpers to conquer his and Israel's enemies and cast panic and fear among them: some foes he drowns in the sea, others he buries in the gaping earth. He himself is a «warrior hero» (Ex 15:3) and his glory merges in the processional hymn Ps 24 with his renown in war [...]. Victory in battle is the first decisive proof of the fact that the God who has chosen Israel and given it his command can accomplish what he has desired and begun (Balthasar 2019, 42-3).

God demonstrated His power by caring for Israel, as He had promised to do. This includes the support He provided to Israel during certain battles, which contributes to the perception of the God of Israel as a warrior God. The portrayal of Yahweh as a warrior is rooted in the context of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt. This event not only led to the acknowledgment of divine kingship (Ex 15:18) but also to the description of Yahweh as *ʾîš milḥāmāh*, meaning "warrior" or "man of war" (Ex 15:3)[16]. In Deuteronomy, Moses urges the Israelites to obey the law they received from Yahweh, the one true God. He reminds them of all that God did to free them from bondage:

> Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him (Dt 4:34-35).

The recognition of divine interventions in the history of Israel leads the people to affirm God's complete leadership and sovereignty over all creation. This belief forms the foundation for understanding God as king, judge, and warrior. By acknowledging God as "mighty in battle," Israel demonstrated its faith that He has full control over their lives and that their historical existence depends on Him. As stated in Psalm 108:11-12, "Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies.

Oh grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man!" Israel, a small nation surrounded by powerful empires, placed all its hope in the aid of the King of Glory, the "Mighty in War" (Miller 1965, 39-46).

The Ark of the Covenant is closely connected to the depiction of Yahweh as *gibbôr milḥāmāh*, which translates to "mighty warrior." In rabbinic thought, the psalmist describes Yahweh in martial terms because, until that time, the Ark had accompanied Israel into battle, its presence ensuring victory over their enemies. However, the significance of the Ark of the Covenant extends beyond its role as a symbol of protection in war. This sacred object represents the presence of God among the people, emphasizing its importance in their spiritual and communal life (Feuer 1996, 302; Semen 1997, 150).

In Psalm 24, represented by the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord enters the city in all His glory. The "King of Glory" is described as "strong and mighty," not because of a recent victory in battle, but as a reminder of how Yahweh supported Israel in their conflicts. The psalmist illustrates that God's power is actively manifested in both creation and history. The portrayal of the King of Glory, accompanied by this martial description, emphasizes His sovereignty over creation and His engagement in historical events. In the realm of creation, He overcame chaos and established order; in history, He aids His people in battles, affirming the promises He has made to them.

"Lord of Hosts". On the God of the heavenly hosts (Ps 23:10)

From the sanctuary the question is again asked: "Who is the King of glory"? And the second answer that the people offer is:

יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הוּא מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד
(*Yahweh Sabaoth hûʾ melek hakkāḇôḏ*)

This verse marks the climax of the psalm, shifting the focus from Yahweh's warlike strength (v. 8) to a divine name that highlights His transcendence and authority over all creation. The title "Lord of Hosts" (*Yahweh Sabaoth*) identifies the "King of Glory". In the psalm's structure, this title serves as the key to access the sanctuary; once it is uttered, the gates open. Thus, the significance of the name is underscored, intricately linked to the One who bears it (see Cyril 2024, 13-25; Pașca-Tușa 2010, 15-26).

In the Old Testament, "Lord of Hosts" first appears in connection with the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:3,11), and later, it is associated with the Ark of the Covenant

and centralized worship in Jerusalem. The early chapters of Samuel describe how David received support from the "Lord of Hosts" in his role as king of Israel (2 Kgs 5:10; 7:8-9). Reflecting the Davidic reign and dynasty, the Book of Psalms emphasizes the protection that the "Lord of Hosts" provides to Jerusalem/Zion (Ps 46:7, 11; 48:7), the city that King David conquered from the Jebusites and the place where God chooses to manifest His presence.

Some exegetes consider *Yahweh Sabaoth* to be equivalent to *gibbôr milḥāmāh*, emphasizing Yahweh's warrior character (Ross 2011, 587; Briggs & Briggs 1907, 217). This interpretation suggests that the term *ṣᵉḇāʾōṯ*, which is the plural of *ṣābāʾ* meaning "army," refers to the earthly armies of Israel – specifically, the battle-ready people of Israel. In this view, Yahweh *Sabaoth* is the supreme leader of these armies, engaging in battles alongside His people. This understanding is further supported using the divine name in battle contexts and its association with the presence of the Ark of the Covenant on the battlefield (cf. 1 Sam 17:45; 4:4). However, the meaning of the name "Lord of hosts" extends beyond depicting Yahweh as merely a "divine warrior." It encompasses a much broader significance. In many prophetic and poetic texts, the term *ṣᵉḇāʾōṯ* ("hosts") designates the heavenly beings who serve God, forming a "heavenly council" that reflects the absolute sovereignty of the heavenly King (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Is 6:1-3; Dn 7:9-14). Yahweh, the "King of glory", is surrounded by heavenly servants, distinct from the servants of earthly kings. In this context, the prophet Isaiah, in his inaugural vision in the Temple, sees Yahweh the King, the Lord of hosts, sitting on His throne, with seraphim flying around Him and singing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Is 6:1-3,5). Psalm 89, which highlights the idea of God as King, also speaks of the heavenly council in various forms (vv. 6-8) and poses the question: "O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are?" (v. 8) (Mettinger 2005, 134).

It should not be overlooked that, in connection the Ark of the Covenant, the full designation is "Lord of Hosts, who sits on the cherubim" (2 Sam 6:2; Is 37:16). In Psalm 80, this title appears as "You who are enthroned upon the cherubim" and after that, the divine name "Lord of Hosts" is mentioned four times (Ps 79:1, 4, 7, 14, 19). The Ark was often viewed as the (unoccupied) throne of Yahweh, the invisible King who is represented as seated there among the cherubim (Karagiannis 1995, 274-82; Semen 1997, 149-50). This understanding is further clarified when we consider the temple in Jerusalem. In the Holy of Holies, Solomon placed two large cherubim (1 Kgs 6:23-28). They were positioned parallel to one another, with their faces directed

toward the temple entrance (2 Chr 3:13). Their wings extended toward the temple walls on one side, while on the other, they met forming a throne (1 Kgs 6:27). To the human eye, this throne appeared empty, but it was believed that God was invisibly seated there, in the Holy of Holies. The Ark was placed beneath the wings of the two cherubim (1 Chr 28:2; Ps 132:7). Thus, the temple was referred to as the house of the Ark (1 Chr 28:11) and regarded as the palace of the King of Glory, designated by the Hebrew term *hêkāl* (Ps 27:4), a word also used for the palace of an earthly king (1 Kgs 21:1). Such elements have led rabbinic tradition, as well as a number of modern exegetes, to posit that Psalm 24 was originally composed – or at least first employed – in the context of the temple's dedication. The psalm depicts God's majestic approach to the temple – His palace. He is the "King of Glory" entering His sanctuary. Additionally, the prophet Jeremiah frequently refers to God as "the King, whose name is Lord of Hosts" (Jer 46:18; 48:15; 51:57) (cf. Mettinger 2005, 127-33; Semen 1997, 149-50).

The procession with the ark in Psalm 24, along with the invocation of the name "Lord of Hosts" to enter the gates of the sanctuary, illustrates that the "King of Glory" represents more than merely a "mighty man in battle." In verse 10, the concept of "the King of Glory" is presented more deeply and completely than in verse 8. While Yahweh is described there as a *gibbôr milḥāmāh* – a valiant warrior against earthly foes – here He is depicted as the Lord of the heavenly hosts, reigning over both the visible and invisible realms. Rabbi Ohel Yaakov explains that the psalmist initially speaks of the Temple during pre-messianic times, characterized by violence and force, a period when God demonstrated His power in battles to compel the wicked to submit to His will. In contrast, during messianic times, there will be no need for God to reveal Himself as an avenger. Instead, He will present Himself as the God of the faithful hosts, referring to the people of Israel and possibly the nations that will fulfill His will. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra emphasizes that the "legions" or "armies" mentioned are the heavenly beings. The response in verse 10 is prophetic, describing divine revelation in the Messianic era, when all nations will be inspired to serve the true God. This Messianic time is envisioned as a period of peace, where there will be no need for armed forces. According to the prophets, in those days, instruments of warfare will be transformed into tools for agriculture, and "nation shall not lift up sword against nation" (Mic 4:3; cf. Ps 46:9-11) (Feuer 1996, 302-303).

The transition from the image of the warrior in verse 8 to that of the heavenly King in verse 10 highlights that Yahweh is the ruler of Israel because He is fundamentally the

King of all creation. "He cannot be first in the fullest sense unless He is also the second; just as He cannot truly be the God of Israel unless He is also the God of the world. What God is on earth depends on what He is in heaven. If He has any equals there, He cannot be the King of Glory on earth in the fullest sense. This conclusion reflects the opening line of the Psalm, where the Lord is similarly praised as the God of the world" (Hengstenberg 1863, 423). Viewed this way, the last verse of the psalm clarifies the first: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein". The universal sovereignty of Yahweh, proclaimed at the beginning of the psalm, is reaffirmed at the end by the name *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the God of angelic hosts – the King whose dominion extends over all creation.

Jesus Christ as the King of Glory in Patristic Exegesis

Rev. John Breck, in his exploration of patristic hermeneutics, articulates that for the Church Fathers, the Old Testament and the New Testament together present a unified testimony to the history of salvation. Both sections of Scripture are regarded as "Christian books" as they directly or indirectly refer to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Truth (Jn 14:6). Breck explains that the Holy Fathers justify the view of the Old Testament as a "Christian book" by recognizing that in every theophany or manifestation of God throughout Israel's history, it is not God the Father they perceive but God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. They discern the voice of Christ in the Psalms. For the Church Fathers, figures such as the infant Emmanuel in Isaiah 7, the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 52-53, the innocent man who loves a prostitute in Hosea, and the outpouring of the Spirit foretold by Joel serve as types (*typoi*) or figures of the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. When interpreted correctly, these figures reveal the essence of His person and the purpose of His earthly mission (Breck 2001, 33-34). The Church Fathers, along with Christ and later the New Testament authors, demonstrate that the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament signifies a movement from "promise" to "fulfillment," from prophecy to its realization in the person of Christ.

The hermeneutical considerations outlined here also form the foundation for the patristic interpretation of Psalm 24:7-10. The Holy Fathers viewed the history of salvation as a unified narrative, demonstrating that these verses serve as prophetic foreshadowing of Christ's ascension to the Father in bodily form. Through His resurrection and

subsequent bodily ascension into heaven, Christ assumes His role as King, seated at the right hand of God (as reflected in Ps 109:1-2 and Heb 1:13)[17].

St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher, in his *First Apology*, illustrates that Christ's sufferings were foretold by Isaiah (Is 53:8-12), His ascension into heaven was proclaimed by the Psalmist (Ps 24:7-8), and Daniel spoke of His coming in glory (Dn 7:13) (St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher 1980, 59). In *Dialogue with Trypho*, St. Justin argues that Psalm 24 was not written about Solomon and the temple he built, but rather about Christ, who is described as the "Lord of powers." At His ascension into heaven, God's rulers in heaven (the angels) were commanded to open the gates, allowing the King of glory to enter and sit at the right hand of the Father, as noted in Psalm 110:1: "until I make your enemies your footstool." St. Justin explains why Christ was not initially recognized: "For when the rulers of heaven saw Him of uncomely and dishonoured appearance, and inglorious, not recognising Him, they inquired, «Who is this King of glory?» And the Holy Spirit, either from the person of His Father, or from His own person, answers them, «The Lord of hosts, He is this King of glory»" (St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher 1980, 131).

The text of Isaiah 53 offers, in St. Justin's interpretation, an explanation for why the angels at the gates of heaven do not recognize Jesus. The angels are confounded by how the God-Man ascended into heaven with His body. Origen explores this interpretation in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, relating it to the text of Is 63. He explains that after vanquishing His enemies through His suffering, the Lord ascends into heaven with the body raised from the dead, to be welcomed in the glory of the Father. When the heavenly powers see Him, they inquire, "Who is He who comes in purple, with garments redder than those of the one who gathers in the vineyard, adorned and proud of the abundance of His power?" Those accompanying Him tell the gatekeepers, "Lift up your gates, and the King of glory will enter." However, the gatekeepers are confused when they notice the bloodstains on His hands and ask, "Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?" He replies, "I have crushed them (the enemies)." After taking away sin for the sake of all humanity, Christ ascended to the Father to cleanse His garment in wine and in the blood of grapes (Gn 49:11). According to Origen, this was the baptism to which Christ referred when He said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" (Lk 12:50). Once exalted, Christ hears the words: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110:1) (Origen 1989, 246-9).

The text of Psalm 24:10 is used by St. Athanasius the Great as an argument against the Arian heresy, highlighting the immutability and divinity of the Son of God. St. Athanasius points out that Christ is not a created being; rather, He is true God, exalted above the angels. This can be demonstrated through the Father's words (Ps 2:7; Mt 3:17), the fact that angels ministered to Him (Mt 4:11), and the permission He granted Thomas to call Him "my Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). Additionally, the prophets referred to Him as "Lord of powers" (Ps 48:8) and "Lord of hosts" (Ps 24:10), which is interpreted as the "Lord of hosts" and the true, omnipotent God. If He were merely one of the creatures, He would not be worthy of worship. However, since He is not a creature but the uniquely begotten Son of the worshipping God, He is worshipped and acknowledged as God. He is the Lord of hosts and the Almighty Ruler, just like the Father (St. Athanasius the Great 1989, 257).

Although it is considered part of apocryphal literature, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* presents a unique interpretation regarding the Savior's descent into hell. In this account, two men raised from the dead (as mentioned in Mt 27:52) illustrate how the souls of the righteous in hell were delivered. In the darkness where the Old Testament righteous were found, a bright light suddenly appeared, which was recognized by the prophet Isaiah, the righteous Simeon, and St. John the Baptist as the Son of God. Satan attempts to persuade Hell to receive Jesus merely as a man, arguing that He is not the Son of God. However, Hell demands that its gates be closed. The righteous, in contrast, implore Hell to open its gates, confident that they will be overcome. A voice like thunder commands the gates to be opened for the King of Glory to enter, to which hell responds with the question, "Who is the King of glory?" King David recalls his prophecy and answers Hell with the words, "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle. This is the King of glory." Thus, Christ, the Lord of Glory, enters hell, liberates all the righteous of the Old Testament, and takes them to Heaven (Gospel of Nicodemus 2011, 145-56).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa, in his homily on the Ascension of the Lord, emphasizes that in Psalm 24:7-10, the prophet David provides a more detailed account than what is found in the Gospel. While the Gospel recounts Christ's earthly life and briefly describes His ascension into heaven (Mk 16:19; Lk 24:51; Acts 1:9), David speaks of the reaction of the heavenly powers now when the Son of God, who is incarnate and victorious over death, approaches the heavenly gates. The angels accompanying the Lord during His ascension ask for the gates of heaven to be opened. The ushers, unaware of who is approaching, inquire, "Who is the King of glory?" The heavenly powers respond,

proclaiming that it is "the one who is strong and mighty in battle," who will confront the being that had imprisoned human nature and who is destined to break the bonds of death. By overcoming this last enemy (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), He will restore freedom and peace to humanity. Although the victory has already been achieved, the ushers repeat their question because they do not recognize the One who has taken on human life and whose garments are stained with human sin (Is 63:2). Those who accompany Him no longer declare Him simply as "strong and mighty in battle," but now recognize Him as "the Lord of powers" (according to the Septuagint translation), who has attained dominion over all, has recapitulated everything in Himself, and has restored creation to its original state: "He is the King of glory" (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1994, 101-6).

In the interpretation of Psalm 24:7-10 by the Church Fathers, the idea emerges that Christ, through His ascension into heaven, opens the gates of heaven for all humanity[18]. In the *Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word*, St. Athanasius explains that Christ did not need the opening of the gates, as He is the Lord of all. The request for the doors to be opened refers to the human nature He assumed and with which He ascended to heaven (St. Athanasius the Great, 1987, 121). By this act, all humanity now has a representative at the right hand of the Father (St. Augustine, 2000, 248). St. Gregory Palamas notes that after blessing the Apostles, Christ "ascended in glory, entered the Holy of Holies not made by hands and sat down on the right hand of the heavenly majesty, making our human substance share His own throne and divinity". By ascending to heaven in His body, Christ united things below with things above and formed one Church that is both heavenly and earthly. He has placed human nature on the heavenly throne, and everyone who believes in Him is resurrected and ascends with Him (St. Gregory Palamas, 2020, 13-23).

Conclusions

Represented by the Ark of the Covenant, Yahweh, the King of glory, enters the sanctuary. This act carries significant theological implications. In worship, the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly sanctuary are intimately connected. The presence of the Lord in the earthly sanctuary reflects His presence in the heavenly sanctuary. The Psalms highlight a mysterious relationship between Yahweh's dwelling place in heaven and His presence in Zion (Ps 9:11) (Clements 2015, 114; Kraus 1993, 314). For Israel, Yahweh is the heavenly King who manifests His presence in His holy place.

The theme of divine kingship appears frequently in the Old Testament. God, seen as King, is the Creator of the world, the maker of Israel, and the one who cares for His people. Psalm 24 refers to Him as "the King of glory," emphasizing that the One who enters the gates is not an earthly king, but Yahweh, God who has revealed His glory throughout Israel's history.

The answers to the question "Who is the King of Glory?" clarify His identity through two complementary characteristics. The first answer – "the Lord Mighty and Strong" – depicts Him as the King who supports His people in battle, rooted in the covenant established with them. The second answer – "Lord of Hosts" – highlights both His transcendence and His protective presence among the people. He is the King of the Heavenly Hosts, whose sovereignty extends over all creation. These two answers not only define Yahweh's identity but also suggest that His power is directed towards the unfolding of salvation history. Yahweh demonstrates His power and reveals Himself as the absolute Master of both the seen and unseen worlds, not to dominate Israel's enemies but to protect, rule, and deliver His people. The goal is that in the kingdom of the King of glory, wars will cease, and people will live in eternal peace. The rabbinic tradition speaks of the pre-messianic era, characterized by wars and violence, and the coming messianic era, in which peace will be established, and the sovereignty of the God of Israel will be recognized by all nations.

In patristic exegesis and the teaching of the Church, the theological message of Psalm 24:7-10 is understood as a prophetic testimony to Christ's bodily ascension into heaven. Church Fathers such as St. Justin Martyr, Origen, St. Athanasius the Great, and St. Gregory of Nyssa interpret the liturgical dialogue of the Psalm as a heavenly scene, where the angels accompany the risen Christ and call for the gates of heaven to be opened. Those who guard these gates, unable to comprehend how human nature can enter heavenly glory, ask, "Who is the King of glory?" The response proclaims Christ's victory: "The Lord who is strong and mighty, the Lord who is mighty in battle, Lord of hosts, this is the King of glory."

This patristic interpretation views the history of salvation from a typological perspective. In the cultic procession of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing God's presence, is placed in the Holy of Holies within the sanctuary. Yahweh is present amid His people, offering protection and safety. In His ascension to heaven, Christ enters the Holy of Holies – not made by human hands – and sits on the heavenly throne, remaining present in the Church and in communion with those who believe in Him.

Notes

[1] In worship, both actions and words serve to signify a particular situation, symbolizing what is taking place. The entrance of Yahweh, represented by the Ark of the Covenant, into the Temple in a solemn procession illustrates His recognition as the King of Glory and the Almighty, present among the people. When the priests lift and carry the ark of the covenant in procession, it signifies that Yahweh Himself is leading His people as their King (cf. Ex 15:17-18; Nm 10:35-36) (See Mowinckel 1967:20-21).

[2] The three sections of the psalm are generally recognized by most exegetes. However, there are differing opinions regarding the relationship between these sections. Some scholars argue that we cannot consider the psalm to have a unified structure; instead, they believe it consists of three distinct texts that were later compiled into a single hymn. Other scholars assert that the psalm does form a cohesive structure, with each part logically flowing into the next from a poetic standpoint. Peter Craigie suggests that the psalm can be viewed as a unified composition if we consider the theme of divine kingship, which is present in all three sections but expressed with varying nuances. Hans Kraus also supports the idea of a unified structure, focusing on the cultic event of the procession from the end back to the beginning. In this interpretation, the pilgrims arrive at the sanctuary gates and engage in an antiphonal dialogue (vv. 7-10). Prior to their arrival, the requirements for entering the holy place of the Lord are outlined (vv. 3-6); meanwhile, during the procession, praise is offered to God, the Creator of the world (Sumpter 2014, 31-54; Kraus 1993, 311; Craigie 1983, 211).

[3] This aspect of the Lord's perfect dominion over the world, which stems from God's creative action, is also present in Ps 74, 89, 95. In the last psalm mentioned, universal sovereignty is directly linked to divine kingship: "For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods, In his hand are the depths of the earth" (Ps 94:3) (See Gunkel 1903, p. 367).

[4] According to Athanase Negoiță, liberal researchers of the Old Testament show that, in poetic and prophetic writings, similarities with the myths of the Ancient Near East can be observed in terms of cosmogony. In Job there is the image of the laying of the earth on the foundations (Job 38:4-7). Peter Craigie points out that the message of verse 2 is more profound, with the psalmist intending to show Yahweh's supremacy over creation, in contrast to the Canaanite god Baal. In Canaanite cosmogonic mythology, *Yam* ("sea" – expanse of waters) also called *Nahar* ("river"), the god of the sea, was considered a threat to the order of creation; the conquest of *Yam* by the god Baal represented the subjugation of the forces of chaos and the establishment of the kingship of Baal. Using the terms *yam* and *nahar* in a demythologized and depersonalized sense (Ps 23:2), the psalmist detaches himself from the Canaanite myth, emphasizing that God the One – Yahweh is master of

creation and that, as creator and supporter of the whole world, he rules over the forces of chaos. The message is significant, because just as in the Ugaritic myth the conquest of *Yam* culminated in the kingship of Baal, so the creative work of the Lord is linked to the divine kingship affirmed in verses 7-10 (Negoiță 2004, 69-70; Craigie 1983, 212).

[5] To enter the palace of a king, one must adhere to the etiquette of the court. Similarly, individuals should demonstrate proper spiritual behavior in the house of God, the King of glory (Gunkel 1903, 368).

[6] A parallel text of this passage is found in Psalm 15. An echo of the enumerated conditions and a clarification of what he desires in man's relationship with God can be seen in the book of the prophet Micah 6:6, 8:

> "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Gunkel 1903, 367).

[7] The Hebrew term *tzeḏākah* refers to the justice that a person receives from God because of His judgment. Those who embody the qualities described in the psalm are regarded as "righteous" by God. This means that God acknowledges them as faithful and committed to fulfilling His will, and as a result, He blesses them (Gunkel 1903, 368).

[8] In the Ancient Near East – both in Israel and among other cultures – names, particularly those of deities, were regarded as extremely significant and held in high esteem. Pronouncing the name of a god was believed to invoke their presence, allowing believers to overcome opposing forces by uttering that sacred name (Gunkel 1903, 369-370).

[9] The Hebrew term *ʿôlām* has the meaning of "ancient", "long ago (in the past)", which later acquires the meaning of "eternal" or "forever". In the Greek text it is translated as *aionios*, meaning "eternal", in opposition to what is temporary or transitory (Jenni 1997, 852-861; Sasse 1964, 208).

[10] Exegetes indicate that this is a metonymy used in cultic language. The "gates" that people reference are represented by the gatekeepers, who have the responsibility to open or close these gates (Craigie 1983, 212).

[11] Rabbi David Kimchi, following the same line of interpretation, points out that until the construction of the Temple, the Ark Covenant did not have a permanent abode. With its erection and consecration, the Ark passes through its gates to find eternal rest in the Holy of Holies. For this reason, gates are called eternal (Feuer 1996, 301).

[12] While captive in Babylon, the Israelites long for their homes and the Temple in

Jerusalem. The Psalmist reminds them that the entire earth belongs to the Lord, which means He is present with them even in Babylon. Offering this reassurance, the Psalmist encourages them to live virtuously and to contemplate the question of who will be worthy to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. The answer is that only those who adhere to the principles outlined in verses 4-6 will be deemed worthy of returning to the holy place of the Lord.

[13] The interpretation draws parallels with another battle fought by the Israelites against the Philistines. In that battle, the Israelites, believing they were losing, brought the Ark of the Covenant to the battlefield, convinced that God's presence among them would guarantee their victory. In this context, the Ark was viewed as a symbol of divine power against their enemies. However, the Israelites ultimately lost the battle, which suggests the opposite. While the ark is indeed a symbol of divine power, it is not an instrument for achieving victory in war (1 Kgs 4:4).

[14] This cultic interpretation of the text faces some challenges. There is no clear historical evidence to support the claim that after Solomon placed the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple, it was carried out in liturgical processions, as suggested by the interpretation of verses 7-10 of Psalm 24. Once the Ark was definitively established in the Holy of Holies within the Temple, there is no record of such a procession occurring (Craigie 1983, 212).

[15] In the biblical context, glory refers to a way of revealing God's presence in a manner that humans can perceive. Throughout history, God has demonstrated His glory in various forms to reassure Israel – both individually and collectively – that He is present, that He is with them, and that He is the living, almighty God who cares for them (see Chirilă 2020, 73-90).

[16] The image of the "divine warrior" also appears in other texts of the Old Testament, such as Nm 21:14, 1 Sam 18:17, Is 42:13, and Zeph 3:17. These passages contribute to the theme of the divine warrior, Yahweh being understood as a God who is involved in the wars of Israel. To understand why Yahweh was perceived in this way, it is important to explore the historical, contextual, and theological explanations (see Miller 1965, 39-46).

[17] St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in his well-known catechesis, emphasizes that the Son did not gain the honor of sitting on the throne because of the work of salvation that He accomplished. Rather, He has been sitting on the throne with the Father from eternity. The events are therefore presented in the order of temporality. (St. Cyril of Jerusalem 2003, 244).

[18] St. Jerome indicates that after the Incarnation and the victory on the cross, Christ enters the gates of heaven with greater strength than when He first came to earth. This correlates with the Scripture, "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous will enter

through it" (Ps 118:20). St. Jerome recalls the saints who have already passed through these gates, such as the thief crucified with Christ, St. Peter the Apostle, St. Paul, and all the apostles and martyrs. That is why, in an Easter homily, St. Jerome encourages Christians by presenting these figures as proof that strengthens their faith in their own entry into the gates of heaven, which Christ has opened for them (*The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, 1964, 251). In a spiritual sense, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in his Easter homily, speaks about the call for every Christian to follow Christ, both in times of suffering and in moments of victory:

> "If you are crucified with him as a thief, come to know God as kindhearted (...). If he descends into Hades, go down with him. Know also the mysteries of Christ there: what is the saving plan (....). And if he ascends into heaven, go up with him. Join with the angels escorting him or those receiving him. Give orders that the gates be lifted up or become higher, that they may receive him, lifted high from his passion. To those in doubt because of the body and the identifying marks of the passion, with which he did not descend but did ascend, who because of this inquire, "Who is this King of glory?" answer that he is "the Lord strong and mighty," both in everything that he has always done and is doing and in the present battle and triumph of his humanity" (St. Gregory of Naziansus 2008, 185).

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BOOK REVIEWS

Spiritual Interpretation of the Old Testament

Cătălin-Emanuel Ștefan

† Benedict Bistrițeanul, *Năvalnicii Împărăției: Personalități ale Vechiului Testament în căutarea lui Dumnezeu* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2022), 172 p.

What is the relevance of the Old Testament today? What other useful insights can we find within it? Many of the laws it prescribes are considered outdated, and its moral teachings are often viewed as inferior to those found in the New Testament. The prophecies in the Old Testament have been fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Additionally, the interpretations provided by the Church Fathers have clarified much of its content. In the context of the Church of Christ, it seems that everything has either been fulfilled, abolished, or explained. So, what remains in the Old Testament that can be seen as more than just an introduction to the Gospel?

Unfortunately, this superficial perspective reflects the views of many believers, but not His Grace Benedict, whose book aims to "recalibrate" certain misconceptions, which is a welcome addition. Small, concise, and visually appealing in both form and content, the work of the new Bishop of Sălaj has the potential to become a cherished book that circulates from hand to hand, gradually opening the eyes of many readers. Several characteristics support this belief. First and foremost, its pleasant appearance is noteworthy. The cover, the subtle illustrations at the beginning of each chapter, and the thoughtful arrangement of the text are key elements that can capture a reader's interest. Additionally, the book's literary presentation is worth highlighting. As can be seen in other books[1], His Grace Benedict possesses the ability to infuse his message with musicality, naturally blending both traditional and contemporary terms into his speech[2], letter games[3], and a special attention to various details[4] are just some of the evidence of this. It is essential to highlight the most important aspect of his work: it provides a straightforward yet profoundly insightful way to appreciate the true beauty of certain characters, events, or texts. This is particularly relevant for the writings of the Old Testament, which often feel distant from us.

The true value of the book lies not in its surface features, but in its content. This can be summarized using three key terms from the author's speech: "God," "medallion," and "itinerary." Each of these terms holds particular significance for this work, and we will illustrate their meanings in the following discussion. It is natural for religious literature to center around God, but His Grace Benedict's speech does so in a distinctive manner. This is evident from the content at the beginning of the book, which aims to illuminate various characters from the Old Testament. Each character is designated a separate chapter, with titles that encapsulate their main attributes. Overall, the content presents an extremely "theophoric" theme, as each character is described through the lens of their relationship with God. For example, Abraham is referred to as the "Receiver of God," Jacob as the "Combatant of God," Moses as the "Seer of God," and Joshua as the "Inquirer of God." The fifteen characters featured in the book are identified with titles typically used in church language, such as "patriarch," "prophet," or "king," along with a name that follows the model. This approach deepens the understanding of each character in relation to the divine, often offering a dual perspective on their experiences[5]. It is important to highlight that throughout the content—and indeed in the book itself—God is at the center. Each character refers to Him in one way or another. This theme is emphasized by the book's subtitle, "Old Testament Personalities in Search of God," as well as its introduction, which is titled "Around God."

In the language of His Grace Benedict, each portrait of biblical personalities is referred to as a "medallion." This term has been carefully chosen to reflect essential characteristics of these portraits. A medallion is a small object that possesses an appealing appearance and inherent value. Similarly, His Grace captures the essence of each biblical figure in a way that embodies these three qualities. In approximately nine pages, he offers a theological, spiritual, and liturgical perspective that highlights what the Church regards as most valuable in each Old Testament character. Therefore, we believe that by using the concept of the "medallion," the author has effectively synthesized part of the treasure of Holy Tradition.

The concept of the "itinerary" provides an opportunity to engage with and embrace the richness of the Old Testament that this book explores. For each biblical figure, the book outlines their spiritual journey in relation to God. His Grace Benedict does not offer traditional biographies; instead, he describes these spiritual journeys as paradigms that readers can reflect upon for their own paths. The term "itinerary" suggests that these journeys lead somewhere meaningful, comprising various stages

with a clear destination: spending time with God. While this itinerary is well-defined, it can be challenging for both the biblical personalities and for us. That is why the righteous individuals highlighted in the book are referred to as "rushers," meaning those who confront the "waves" of life's challenges. However, they are not just any type of "assailants"; they are "assailants of the kingdom." Their goal is the Kingdom of God, which allows us to draw closer to Him.

His Grace Benedict's work is neither a study of biblical theology nor a treatise on Orthodox spirituality. Instead, it serves as a personal diary from someone who has wrestled with the biblical text and uncovered the profound insights hidden beneath its challenges. Thus, it can be seen as a journey for those who seek their own experience with God, following in the footsteps of those who have weathered similar storms.

Notes

[1] As well as *Brațele părintești* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2021) or the three-volume series *Personalități duhovnicești contemporane* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2016-2020).

[2] E.g.: "Job, the '*adorner*' of God" – p. 119 / "he is asked to come out of his own [...] and set off for nowhere" – p. 22-3.

[3] E.g.: "God was *close* to him and *his Neighbor*" – p. 9.

[4] E.g.: "a vocabulary of military nuance, consisting of a few key terms, *nouns* or *verbs*" – p. 57.

[5] Only two characters are in this situation, namely Jacob, "God's combatant", and Joshua, "God's spy". Jacob was the one who fought *against* God, and *together* with him, Joshua was the one who sought God.

PhD Students Research on the Old Testament (III)

Gabriel Cireașă

Scriptură și Tradiție (patristică și rabinică) – cercetări doctorale, eds. Ioan Chirilă, Stelian Pașca-Tușa și Bogdan Șopterean (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024), 240 p.

In a world filled with fleeting opinions and superficial understandings, this volume provides a refreshing break. It offers a thoughtful and in-depth exploration of biblical interpretation, drawing on the wisdom of two respected traditions. Rooted in Romanian Orthodox scholarship, this collection of essays invites readers to explore the riches of Patristic and Rabbinic perspectives. Through this lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of the enduring power of Scripture.

What stands out to the reader is the genuine respect and reverence that fill these essays. The authors engage with their subject matter not as detached academics analysing ancient texts, but as pilgrims striving to draw closer to the divine through the insights gathered by generations of faithful interpreters. This approach adds warmth and sincerity to the volume, making it feel more like a shared spiritual journey than a textbook.

The selected themes, ranging from the sanctification of the Sabbath to the complexities of messianic prophecy, are thoughtfully curated to represent a wide array of scriptural concerns. Individual essays, such as the exploration of "spiritual pilgrimage," illuminate familiar passages in unexpected ways, uncovering the hidden depths of meaning and relevance. The authors showcase their expertise in their respective subjects, skilfully combining meticulous textual analysis with profound theological insight. Each work reflects a deep understanding of the topics discussed.

One of the strengths of this volume is its ability to bridge the perceived gap between the Patristic and Rabbinic traditions. Instead of merely placing these two worlds side by side, the authors meticulously trace the subtle points of convergence and divergence. They highlight shared values and perspectives while also acknowledging

the distinct historical and cultural contexts of each tradition. This approach fosters a sense of harmonious dialogue, resulting in a richer and more nuanced understanding of the biblical text.

The volume's emphasis on "interpretation" is especially relevant today. In a world filled with misinformation and distorted narratives, this book highlights the importance of engaging thoughtfully and with historical awareness when it comes to sacred texts. It emphasizes the importance of approaching Scripture with humility, acknowledging our own limitations and appreciating the insights of those who have grappled with these texts for centuries. This is an important aspect that deserves our attention.

While the volume requires some familiarity with theological concepts, the writing style remains accessible and engaging, fostering an atmosphere of understanding.

In the context of Romanian Orthodoxy, this volume makes a significant contribution to theological scholarship. It presents a compelling alternative to secular and materialistic interpretations of Scripture, reaffirming the lasting importance of faith and tradition in understanding the divine word. This book is sure to leave a lasting impression on those interested in similar subjects.

This collection of essays offers more than just a scholarly exploration of biblical interpretation; it serves as an invitation to embrace the wisdom of the past. By doing so, we can illuminate the present and gain a deeper understanding of the divine mysteries found within Scripture. I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking a more meaningful and enriching engagement with the Bible, and I encourage my friends who are theologians to read it.