

The Icon and Visual Arts

Section “Iconoclasm”

The issue of “seeing” God or God’s appearance in the Hebrew Bible

(optional text)

The analysis will start with the role of angels in the Hebrew Bible. The most famous problem of Biblical angelology is associated with the most common name for the angel in the Hebrew tradition — *mal’akh* (messenger) — or, more precisely, with the combination *mal’akh Yahweh* (the Angel of the Lord). According to Heidt,¹ “...the crux of the problem is this: in many Old Testament passages there occurs the phrase *mal’akh Yahweh*; taking the context into consideration this ‘angel of the Lord’ frequently speaks and acts not as a messenger but as Yahweh himself, speaking and acting directly. Is then this *mal’akh* ... a visible or audible phenomenon or manifestation employed by God through which he may deal directly with man?” The question is thus whether the function of the angel in the Hebrew Bible is to be a manifestation of God. The *mal’akh Yahweh* problem poses a question about the possibility of presentation of the unseen (divine) in a visible and sensible form—a question which at a certain point triggers the one about the possibility of representation.²

There are several passages in the Hebrew Bible where the “angel of the Lord” acts, speaks, and is perceived and referred to as God himself, therefore suggesting that it is nothing else than God’s apparition, and not an independent entity. Thus Gen.16.7 names the “angel of the Lord” that finds Hagar by a spring of water and speaks to her (16.8-11). However, Hagar’s reaction to this in 16.13 is as follows: “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’” The theme that seeing God in his essence is deadly is very common in the Hebrew Bible. It certainly fits quite well with the

¹W.G. Heidt, *Angelology of the Old Testament: a study in Biblical theology*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of American Press, 1949, pp.69-70. This study also lists the majority of the passages related to the *mal’akh Yahweh* problem quoted below.

²All the relevant passages from the Hebrew Bible analysed below will be quoted according to the following translation: *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

necessity to have a special “messenger” or apparition instead of the divinity itself for the purposes of communication.³ In Gen.22.11 the “angel of the Lord” calls to Abraham “from heaven” and says: /22.12/ “...for I know now that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” In Gen. 31.11 the “angel of God” says to Jacob in a dream: /31.13/ “...I am the God of Bethel where you ... made a vow to me.” In Gen. 32.24 Jacob clearly wrestles with, and sees, an angel (something in a human form). Yet this does not prevent him from saying in 32.30: “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” In the famous episode with Moses and the burning bush (Ex. 3.2) “the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush.” However, the narrative continues, /3.4/ “When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush... /6/ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” Next follows the famous conversation where it is definitely God himself who speaks to Moses (3.14-16). In Judg. 2.1 “the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said: I brought you up from Egypt ... I said, I will never break my covenant with you...” After switching to God’s discourse, however, Judg. 2.4 goes back to the term “angel of the Lord.”⁴ One must conclude, finally, that according to the

³Cf. Ex. 33.20, “...But ... you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” /23/ “...and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” Judg. 6.22: Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, “Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.” /23/ But the Lord said to him, “Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.” Again, the text immediately preceding uses the terms “Lord” and “angel of the Lord” interchangeably: /Judg. 6.12/ The angel of the Lord appeared to him (Gideon) and said to him ... /14/ Then the Lord turned to him and said ... /20/ The angel of God said to him... It is worth noting that in 6.21 the angel of the Lord draws flames from the rock with his staff, i.e., is totally visible. Also cf. Judg. 13.3-22 when Manoah and his wife suddenly realize that they have been speaking to the “angel of the Lord” -- the term used many times to describe the apparition: /13.21/ Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the Lord. /22/ And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”

⁴There are several other cases involving the term *mal'akh Yahweh* which are slightly less evident. Thus Gen.21.17: And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her ... /19/ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water... Also cf. the famous episode in Exodus during the flight from Egypt. According to Ex.13.21, “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day ... and in a pillar of fire by night...” However, in 14.19 “The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved...” In another famous episode -- Balaam and his ass -- the angel of the Lord does not quite become God but comes very close to doing so: /Num. 22.22/ God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary ... /31/ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing on the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. Finally, Zechariah equates the two terms in his

existing textual tradition *mal'akh Yahweh* is clearly nothing but a God's way to appear to the senses.⁵

However, the apparitions of God are not restricted to *mal'akh Yahweh*, and references to such apparitions in the Hebrew text are numerous. Thus the apparitions of God may simply be mentioned,⁶ or someone may see something of God but not his face — however, sometimes even the “face” of God is seen;⁷ God can be manifested in the human shape⁸ or as other phenomena.⁹ The fact that God in the Hebrew Bible actually appears, despite the general understanding that it is impossible to see God, creates one of the greatest paradoxes in the history of interpretation in the Mediterranean intellectual tradition, including Christianity and Islam.

Out of all quoted statements, the most puzzling problem, next to the one of *mal'akh Yahweh* where God seems to present himself in the guise of an angel, is connected with the statements which mention the “face” of God or seeing God “face to face.” Indeed, other apparitions could, perhaps, be accounted for as something created, but when one speaks of the “face” of God the situation becomes more problematic.

predictions (12.8): ...and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the Lord, at their head.

⁵Heidt is of the same opinion. Cf. also H.L. Strack, *Die Genesis* (KKHS), München, 1905, p.63 quoted in Heidt, *op.cit.*, p.71, n.9.

⁶Cf.: Gen. 17.1, When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him...; Ex. 24.10, ...and they (Moses and the 70 elders) saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness; Num. 12.6, (God's words) “When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses ... With him I speak face to face -- clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord”; Isaiah 6.1-6, /1/ ...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne ... /5/ ...my eyes have seen the King, the lord of hosts...

⁷Cf. one of the major apparition of God (to Moses) in the Hebrew Bible: Ex. 33.11, Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend... (God's words) /19/ “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name ‘YHWH’... /20/ ...But ... you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live...” /23/ “...and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

⁸Cf. Gen.18.2 - He (Abraham) looked up and saw three men standing near him.

⁹Cf. Ex.16.10, 19.9, 24.17, 33.9, 40.34, Deut. 4.11, and 1 Kings 8.10-11 (references to the appearance of God as a cloud or fire). 1 Kings 19 which describes one of the major apparitions of God (to Elijah in the desert) speaks of /19.11/ “a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord,” an “earthquake,” a /12/ “fire” and finally a “sound of sheer silence” (or a “blow of gentle wind”), only the latter one being the true apparition of God, judging by the characteristic reaction of Elijah (19.13, When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle...).

Let us restate the “paradox of appearance” more clearly. The prohibition of images in the Hebrew tradition is often presented as a consequence of the fact that God cannot be seen — for example, cf. Deut. 4: “/4.12/ Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sounds of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. /15/ Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourself closely...” (i.e., lest you make a representation -- an “idol”). The simplest explanation of such tabooing of images could be based on the fact that all sensible experience, including visual, is subject to errors and interpretations, and making God completely unimaginable necessarily switches all attention to words (cf. the importance of God’s “voice” in the Biblical tradition), ideas, commandments, etc. In other words, the exclusion of representation, or visible presentation, can be regarded as an attempt to diminish the aesthetic component of religion. The question is whether such an attempt can be successful, for in reality, side by side with the instances where it is proclaimed that the face of God shall never be seen, one also reads passages mentioning a “face to face” contact, Ex. 33 being one of the striking examples. Thus the phrase /33.11/ “...the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” is followed by God’s words which seem to suggest the opposite: /19/ “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name ‘YHWH’... /20/ ...But ... you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live... /23/ ...and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” One may also refer to other passages quoted above including Num. 12.6: “...With him (Moses) I speak face to face -- clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.” How can the two types of statements be reconciled?

A solution could be provided by the concept of the “Angel of the Face” (*angelus faciei*). The actual phrase occurs only once in the Hebrew Scriptures (Isaiah 63.9) and even this context is highly controversial because of textual ambiguities in the Hebrew version.¹⁰ The King James version of Is. 63.9 gives the following: “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and *the angel of his presence* saved them.” The Vulgate has *angelus faciei eius* for “angel of his presence,” and the Slavic (Orthodox) translations have “angel of His face.” The reading “angel of the face” in the Hebrew has been rejected by recent scholarship, and the Oxford standard version has, in accordance with it: “...in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them.” However, the important fact is that,

¹⁰See a detailed discussion of this issue in Heidt, *op.cit.*, pp.91-2, especially p.92, n.72.

judging by the later commentaries and apocryphal literature, the reading “angel of the face” was current in both Hebrew and, later, Islamic traditions and had an impact on their angelologies.¹¹ There are also other instances in the Hebrew Scriptures which can confirm the validity of the traditional association of the terms “angel” and “divine face” or “presence.” For example, in Ex. 33.2 God says to Moses: “I will send an angel before you...” However, in 33.14 he repeats his promise in the variant “...my presence will go with you...” This context clearly signifies that the terms “angel” (presumably *mal'akh Yahweh*) and “presence” are used interchangeably, and therefore the “angel of the Lord” is almost synonymous with “divine presence.” The term “angel” thus can be understood almost as “phenomenon” or “apparition,” and the combination “angel of his presence” would simply be an intensified form of either “angel” or “presence.” The idea of having the “Angel of the Face” as a special phenomenon for the purposes of pre-senting God would finally allow one to reconcile the invisibility of God with his frequent appearances in the Hebrew Scriptures. What one sees in a “face to face” situation is, in fact, not God but the “Angel of the Face”! It is also important that, given such an interpretation, whenever the “presence” of God is mentioned in the Hebrew tradition what is really meant is his angel. Thus the attempt to create the most “unaesthetic” tradition seems to be already subverted by the angel as the ultimate manifestation of the necessity of sensible apparitions.

¹¹For example, in the “Book of Jubilees” 2.2 the “angels of the presence” or “face” are a special -- the highest -- category of angels which is distinguished from many others: cf. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, ed. R.H. Charles, vol.2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, pp.13-4.

A short chronology of iconoclasm

Period 1

726, emperor Leo III (Isaurian; 716-741) starts the persecution of iconodules; present Eastern Patriarch *St. Germanus of Constantinople* refuses to comply, as does Pope Gregory II in Rome, and later Gregory III.

John of Damascus, living outside of the empire, immediately writes three speeches against iconoclasts

Constantine V Copronymos (741-770), son of Leo III, continues the persecution of iconodules in a particularly savage and brutal way.

754, the iconoclastic Council (338 members) under Constantine V.

After the Council of 754, persecutions start, especially against monasticism. Monks and icon painters emigrate en masse to Italy where Popes were consistently in favor of icons, to Syria, etc.

Leo IV (the Khazar) (770-775), grandson of Leo III, officially abolishes persecution of iconodules.

Empress Irene (Leo IV's widow, 775-802), an iconodule, plans to call an iconodule Council. The first attempt at Constantinople (786) is thwarted by the iconoclastic army.

787, The VII Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II) presided by Patriarch Tarasius. Iconoclasts are denounced during the beginning sessions. Four sessions are devoted to the question of the icons. The iconoclastic Council of 754 is condemned. The definition of icon veneration is established.

Veneration of icons is supported under Irene's successors Nicephorus (802-811) and Michael I (811-813).

Period 2

Under Leo V the Armenian (813-820), a popular military leader, brutal persecution starts again and continues under Michael II (820-829) and Theophilus (829-842).

Patriarch *Nicephorus* refuses to comply, together with *Theodore the Studite* who openly opposes the new measures against icons. Nicephorus is deposed, and a secular person is elected as Patriarch. The VIIth Ecumenical Council is denounced, and Theodore the Studite is exiled, together with many others.

843, veneration of icons is finally restored under empress Theodora, widow of Theophilus. Patriarch Methodius establishes the celebration of the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" (first Sunday of Lent).

Iconoclasm in the West

790, the *Libri Carolini* ("Caroline Books") put together by court theologians in the name of Charlemagne neither confirm iconoclasm nor support veneration of icon (position of the iconodules)

794, the Frankfurt Council, and the Paris Council of 825 take the same position: icons must be neither destroyed nor venerated.

Iconoclasm: main arguments

The arguments of iconoclasts:

1. The image (icon) must be “of the same essence” with the original (the prototype). But the icon cannot be of the same essence as Christ. Thus the only true image of Christ that he himself left behind is the Eucharist which is of the same essence as himself (his body).
2. According to the teaching of the Church, Christ has two inseparable natures: divine and human. Depicting Christ in the icon you are either depicting only his human side, and this is not enough, or claim to depict his divinity, and this is impossible and blasphemy.

The counter-arguments of iconodules:

1. The image is not of the same essence as the original: it is only a likeness, reflection, or imitation. The represented is not the same as representation.
2. Regarding the “separate” representation of divine and human natures: the icon represents neither, but the “person” of Christ which is one, just as any portrait depicts a person, not the human nature.
3. Since Christ incarnated and was visible he can be portrayed (the Old Testament prohibition of images is no longer valid due to the changed situation: God decided to incarnate). Icons are the proof and evidence of the incarnation: denying icons you deny the reality of incarnation.

The definition from the VIIth Ecumenical Council (Nicaea 787)

Esteem for the Church tradition: icons are part of this tradition.

Icons are the evidence and proof of the real, and not imaginary, incarnation of Christ.

Icons must be offered for veneration, just as the cross and other liturgical objects.

The icons of Christ, Mother of God, the angels, and all Saints must be placed in churches.

When we observe icons they make us think of their prototypes. The more often we see such representations, the more often we remember and love the prototype.

The difference between the true worship (adoration, latria) that is due to God, and veneration (proskynesis) and honor that is due to icons, the Gospel, the cross, and other liturgical objects. "For the honor given to the icon passes over to its prototype, and the one venerating the icon venerates the person represented in it" (St. Basil the Great).

The Kontakion of the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy:

"The undefinable Word of the Father made Himself definable, having taken the flesh of Thee, O Mother of God, and having restored the soiled image to its former state, has suffused it with Divine beauty. But confessing salvation we show it forth in deed and word."

Ὁ ἀπερίγραπτος Λόγος τοῦ Πατρὸς, ἐκ σοῦ Θεοτόκε περιεγράφη σαρκούμενος, καὶ τὴν ῥυπωθεῖσαν εἰκόνα εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀναμορφώσας, τῷ θείῳ κάλλει συγκατέμιξεν. Ἄλλ' ὁμολογοῦντες τὴν σωτηρίαν, ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ ταύτην ἀνιστοροῦμεν.

Specific qualities of icons

1. Explanation of “unrealistic” elements in icons

Icons often exhibit unusual features: architecture, human bodies and faces appear unrealistic and distorted; there is no depth perception (all scenes take place in the foreground) or the use of linear perspective, which is standard in many paintings (icons use “inversed” perspective); lighting is not fixed, there are no shadows, etc.

Linear perspective

In fact, linear perspective and three-dimensional space in painting is not as “realistic” as they seem. It is impossible to represent three-dimensional space or the way we see space on a two-dimensional plane. For this reason any technique is ultimately “unrealistic” or distorting. At the same time alternative types of perspective are frequently used in the history of representation:

isometric; perceptive (with various corrections); dynamic (many points of view, or movement taken into consideration); perspective of importance (the more important person is larger in size and in the center); epic / narrative perspective (the figures are arranged in a certain way “to tell a story”).

It must be admitted that the type of representation used in icons is not “lack of skill” or a “primitive” way of representing reality, but a deliberate choice on the part of the icon painters. Why do they choose this way of painting?

Icon as the sacred image

While “realistic” paintings that use linear perspective etc. are trying to imitate the way we see things, sacred art represents the way we think about things: “what we know” about things rather than “what we see.” Icon painters paint what they know about certain persons or things. It is a particular way of representing reality. If one uses this type of painting, “realistic” image — i.e., the way we see things — makes very little sense.

2. Theology of the icon

The transfigured body

The icons are trying to represent a particular type of reality that goes “beyond” our immediate experience, as well as the ideal or “transfigured” state of the human body (the human body after resurrection, in the world to come, the deified body). This explains the lack of realism and unusual distorted shapes of bodies and faces: e.g., long bodies indicate dematerialization.

Icons as the “windows into the unseen”

According to the classic teaching of the Church, the icons are a visible means of providing some connection with their invisible prototype (original): Christ or some Saint. Therefore the icon is nothing by itself, but acts as a “window” through which we can see the invisible. The icon is the only way we can “see” the divine.

The iconostasis

In the church the altar is the symbolic place set aside for the invisible (it symbolizes the mystery of God), and the rest of the church represents the visible world. The iconostasis serves as a certain boundary between the visible and the invisible world.

The iconostasis is not a barrier, but suggests the presence of the unseen behind it and enables us to connect to it. So by looking at the icons in the iconostasis one is looking at God or the Saints themselves, not at the “paintings.”