

THE PROPHETIC VISIONS OF GOD'S ABODE

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The two biblical prophets whose inauguration into prophecy consisted of detailed visions of God's abode and His entourage are Isaiah and Ezekiel. None of the other prophets seems to have been granted similar visions, except for the very short allusion in Exodus 24:9,10 that relates how the elders at Sinai had a vision of the Lord but with no lengthy description.¹

It is particularly noteworthy that Moses, the greatest of all prophets, did not offer any report of this nature, despite the fact that he, undoubtedly, was the one who should have had the clearest and most detailed view of God's abode. This omission, more than any other indication, should alert the reader of the Bible to the fact that the reports of the later prophets are possibly meant as symbolic messages, rather than an account of actually existing surroundings. Had Moses thought a detailed presentation of the heavenly abode were of religious significance for his people, he would, undoubtedly, have offered it.

A literal reading of Chapter 6 in Isaiah and Chapter 1 of Ezekiel does furthermore clash with the fundamental Jewish tenet of God's incorporeality. Angels, too, are incorporeal according to Maimonides,² a fact that further contradicts the literal interpretations of these chapters.

The use of allegory is very common throughout the biblical writings. Ezekiel uses it with greater frequency than most others. Many anecdotes throughout the Bible gain in their religious significance if allegorically interpreted. The symbolic explanations offered herewith avoid the aforementioned contradictions and contain messages conforming to Jewish religious principles.

GLOSSARY

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* [*Moreh Nevuchim*] Maimonides devotes the first 50 chapters to explaining the homonymous meanings of many words in the Bible, particularly when they are used in connection with both God and man, and how in many cases a different translation is needed.

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Similarly, words must at times be translated differently if the text calls for allegoric meanings. In the context with the chapters at issue here, the Hebrew word "*ra'ah* [see]" is the first which needs to be examined. It no longer necessarily denotes a physical perception by the eye, but rather a visionary, fictional impact upon the seer. It carries with it an emotional intimacy with the object that is "seen," particularly when the expression serves the "seeing" of God or angels. Thus, in the inaugural chapters of Isaiah and Ezekiel, as well as in the visions of the elders at Sinai, the "seeing" of God serves to acquaint the reader with the emotional experience and the rapport with God which catapulted them into prophecy. The variations in their reports can then be understood by analyzing the differences in their historical settings and the adjustments to the needs of their era.

THE ELDERS AT SINAI

The occasion when the elders "saw the God of Israel," if meant allegorically, need not be understood as a physiological seeing, since the human eye cannot perceive an incorporeal being. Rather, it denotes a temporary experience of superior closeness to the Lord during the momentous events at Mount Sinai. Subsequently, the text delineates the boundaries of their prophetic advance in allegoric terms. After this "sight" they ate and drank (Ex. 24:11) to demonstrate the vast difference between them and Moses, who could forgo food and water for as long as he associated so closely with God.³ Perhaps the insertion that *He* [God] *did not stretch out His hand* to these viewers is symbolically meant as an expression parallel to Ezekiel's, of the "*Hand of God*" being upon him (Ezek. 1:3, et al.). The statement that God did *not* stretch out His hand to them would then symbolically parallel the eating and drinking, and emphasize that Moses, who had set out on the journey together with them, had reached an incomparably higher level.

ISAIAH – THE SIN OF SILENCE:

Isaiah prophesied during a time when Judah had a stable Davidic monarchy. There were threats on the horizon, but at the time of his inauguration, none of the population had been sent into exile. His predictions and admonitions were intended to avoid such an occurrence. Political corruption and

religious inconstancies were widespread. To keep silent in the face thereof might have been comfortable but would be sinful in the eyes of the initiated.

Isaiah's inaugural vision (Ch. 6) is highlighted by the crescendo of the angels' praise of the Lord. So forceful was their call that their voices caused the palace's pillars to tremble. The impact of this crescendo evokes in the prophet the painful comparison with his own silence up to now. He cries out, "*Woe unto me because I have been silent.*"⁴ What follows is that one of the angels touches the prophet's mouth with an ember, for it was the mouth which had been sinfully silent and therefore needed and received purification. From then on, Isaiah can and will be the spokesman for God among his people.

The vociferous angels in Isaiah's vision are called "seraphim." No place else in the entire Bible are angels called by this name. The word seraphim in biblical language means "serpents."⁵ Why would the prophet call these angels serpents?

The snake, among the land animals, is least endowed with a strong voice. Practically all mammals and most large creatures, other than fish, have distinct voices and many have the ability to increase or decrease the volume of the sound they produce. Not so the serpent. It is this seeming contradiction which serves as an emphasis for their allegoric role. The challenge of God's greatness, as presented here, can produce a crescendo even in these normally silent creatures.

Serpents also have no legs. Therefore, these flying seraphim cover their feet and their faces (V. 2); the parts which in the normal life of snakes are missing along with voices. The presence of the Lord can transform even these unendowed reptiles into God-praising angels. How much more should the endowed humans proclaim the praise of their Creator.

Could there be a more appropriate symbolic vision to convert a person into a prophet? Is it not easy to understand why this symbolic scene brings to the prophet's attention how sinful silence can be?

EZEKIEL – GOD'S UBIQUITY

Ezekiel lived at a time when the statehood of Judah had deteriorated and finally collapsed. A substantial portion of its population had been exiled to Babylon, while others fled and settled in Egypt. During this prophet's lifetime, the Jerusalem Temple, the center of Judah's religion, went up in flames.

The survival of monotheism seemed almost impossible. The surrounding cultures were generally based on the belief in geographic deities, teaching the demise of any religion whose center no longer existed.

The prophet was faced with the task of convincing the Judean exiles that their God was not confined to the location from which He previously had inspired His adherents. Ezekiel had to strengthen the belief in the ubiquity of the Jewish God which made the continuation of monotheism possible.

When Ezekiel "saw" God's abode and His entourage, the most notable feature was not sound but motion. God did not sit on an anchored throne. He was being carried by angels who had four faces, able to move in any one direction without as much as having to turn their heads. And each of these carriers was in turn connected to another angel who was called an "*ophan* [wheel]." The prophet observes this scene, the motion generated by any wind and thus going in all directions as the air may blow.

Whereas Isaiah's vision places God on a stationary throne with seraphim around and above Him, Ezekiel's inspiration is the recognition of God being carried by mobile *hayoth* [animals, living creatures] and rolling *ophanim*. Ezekiel is inaugurated into prophecy when "seeing" or experiencing the ubiquity of the Lord who, because of His mobility, can be reached by all the exiles among His people equally, be they north or south. His entourage does not engage in vociferous praise, but are predominantly engaged in motion that symbolizes God's ubiquity.⁶

Similarly to Isaiah, Ezekiel assigns to these mobile angels names that are not found anywhere else in the Bible. The name of the *ophanim* clearly refers to mobility. The name of the *hayoth* adds to their allegoric meaning by assuring that God not only rules everywhere but also over all species of life. The two groups of angels and their names extend the rule of the Jewish God over all life and every place on the earth. This emphasis is repeated in the appearance of the *hayoth* with four faces; one of a human being, one of an ox, one of a lion and one of an eagle.⁷ These four faces encompass human beings, domestic animals, wild animals and flying creatures. An additional allegoric symbol of their role is demonstrated by their stiff, metallic calf feet, alluding to the fact that they are unable to sit down. Their obligation is to move.⁸

Whereas the seraphim of Isaiah were hiding their faces and legs under their wings, as if to conceal the parts which are lacking in ordinary serpents, the

hayoth of Ezekiel hide their hands under their wings. The hand and its dexterity is a gift to man; *hayoth*, being beasts, do not possess them. Therefore they must place them under the wings to maintain their identity and its symbolic meaning. However, the *ophanim* are endowed with many eyes to symbolize God's ability to see in all areas to which they may roll.

In 3:12, Ezekiel reports that he heard the words *Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place*. Long before, in Chapter 1, he had heard only the sounds made by the wings of the angels. Their wings, their tools of mobility, are of foremost importance in this allegoric setting. The words that he ultimately does hear refer again to motion and geographic location, the allegory of God's ubiquity, which Ezekiel is commanded to proclaim.

NOTES

1. The vision of Michaiah in I Kings 22:19 was not inaugural.
 2. *Moreh Nevuchim* Part I, Chapter XLIX
 3. See Ibn Ezra ad locum and his quote of Yehuda Halevi.
 4. Compare Radak's commentary to Isaiah 6:5, where he quotes the translation of his father, who translates the Hebrew word *nidmesi* to mean "I kept silent." Mezudas Ziyon also includes this translation.
 5. Numbers 21:8; Deuteronomy 8:16; Isaiah 14:29, 30:6.
 6. The liturgical poets have chosen to endow Ezekiel's angels with loud voices and vociferous expression of God's praise. They also have placed the angels of Isaiah and those of Ezekiel into one scene. This poetic liberty has produced liturgy of great value and inspiration. However, in the text the exclamation *Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place* is not included in Chapter 1 and is mentioned only later in Chapter 3. No words or speech is recorded in the first chapter.
 7. In the repetition of this vision in Chapter 10, when the prophet found himself in Jerusalem, the ox is changed to a cherub; this can be explained by the fact that the Temple contained cherubim, and that an attempt was made to connect with the Temple that was still standing at the time.
 8. Compare Bereshit Rabba 65
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