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THEOPHANY AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY

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My first point is to make a distinction. The theophanies in which the deity has appeared in human form have often, in treatments of the subject, been taken as merely one among many anthropomorphic statements or ways of speech, or at the most a particular class among them. Thus studies of anthropomorphism commonly begin with those often mentioned references to God's hands, feet, ears, nose, his speaking, smelling, walking in gardens, shutting doors, laughing, whistling, treading winepresses, rising early in the morning, rejoicing, being disgusted, changing his mind, being jealous and so on; and the appearances of God in human forms are lumped in with all these as further examples of the same phenomenon. It seems desirable however to make some distinction between them. These frequent expressions about God's ears or nose, his smelling or whistling, are not seriously anthropomorphisms in the sense of expressions trying to come to grips with the form, the *morphe*, of God. The real reason for their prominence has been their offensiveness to rationalistic thought; and this has led scholars, no doubt quite properly, to point out their value in asserting the personality and activity of the God of Israel. But what is important for the modern justification of the Old Testament may be much more trivial for Old Testament times themselves. These expressions provide a rich vocabulary for the diversity of the divine activity; but for the more precise and particular question which the word "anthropomorphism" should suggest, the question in what *form*, if any, God may be known, there is a danger of exaggerating their importance, just as, I submit, it is exaggerating the importance of Hos. v 14 or Amos i 2 to call it a "theriomorphism" when Yahweh is like a lion to Ephraim or roars from Mt. Zion.

In contrast with all this, it is in the theophanies where God lets himself be seen that there is a real attempt to grapple with the form

of his appearance. Indeed, for Hebrew thought "form" and "appearing" may be taken as correlative, and where there is no "appearance" a passage is of only secondary importance for the idea of form. We should point here to the great importance which the theophany had in ancient religions in general. And thus when we read in Gen. xviii that Yahweh appeared to Abraham "and behold three men", or when we read in Exod. xxxiii the question of whether, and how or in what form, Yahweh will go with the Israelite migration, our attention is at once arrested and quite properly directed to the shape of the divine appearing, much more than in the normal references to God's walking or rising. Theophany forms in fact a special class.

Theophanies often introduce themselves with some form of the word to see, in narrative passages commonly *way-yēra*, "and Yahweh let himself be seen, showed himself." It is noticeable however that in many cases no attempt whatever is made at describing the form of the appearance, and we are told only what words were uttered. Thus we see that in many cases the describing of the theophanic appearance is less important than the registering of the words spoken; or perhaps more probably, that the recording of the appearance in detail was felt by writers often to be too serious and difficult to attempt except in special cases. But sometimes even when the words spoken form the main content of the passage, traces of theophanic description remain; e.g. in the revelation to Samuel in 1 Sam. iii, where *way-yityaṣṣab* in v. 10 may probably be seen as a trace of the common picture of theophany in erect human form, cf. *niṣṣab* in Gen. xviii 2, xxviii 13, Amos vii 7, ix 1. We also have the type of Exod. xxiv 9-11 where it is explicitly said that Moses and his companions saw the God of Israel but the description given is not of the deity but of his surroundings.

Not all theophanic statements, then, are accompanied by description; but there is adequate evidence for a strong tradition in early Israel that Yahweh let himself be seen at times in the form of man; and the same form is assumed by the *'elohim* of Gen. xxxii 23-33, who may or may not be taken to be Yahweh, and by the companions of Yahweh in Gen. xviii, who are described as *mal'akim* in xix 1. If I might refer to a phrase of Prof. ROWLEY's (*The Faith of Israel*, p. 75) that "in the OT God is nowhere conceived of as essentially in human form. Rather is he conceived of as pure spirit, able to assume a form rather than having in himself physical form", I think the central truth in this is the ability of God to assume a form,

and to let this form be seen by men. The question whether we can go on usefully to say that he is conceived as pure spirit I would rather leave alone, because I am not sure if it is either fully meaningful or if there is good evidence on which to decide it. The most important question which remains is perhaps better phrased thus: not "Is God conceived of as essentially in human form?", but "When he does appear in a form at all, is it thought that the human form is the natural or characteristic one for him to assume?" To the question put in this way it seems to me that we are entitled to answer in the affirmative. We have, however, to speak carefully, partly because the sources which speak about the matter at all are few and partly because of some other difficulties of which we must now say a little.

It is commonly supposed that from an early time anthropomorphism was felt as a difficulty or an embarrassment, and that certain mitigations of it were introduced, such as dreams and angelic mediation; such attempts at mitigation have been seen as early as the source E of the Pentateuch. There are however some reasons for doubting whether this interpretation of these phenomena is a good one. To take dreams first of all, it is by no means clear that communication by a dream is intended to have the effect of mitigating the directness of an anthropomorphic appearance. It could be argued that on the contrary the dream increases the directness and gives a stronger vision. Certainly the dream vision of Jacob at Bethel is not lacking in directness. There are of course dreams where only the content of the message is recorded, and not the form of the person seen, but this is true also of theophanies.

When we come to the *mal'ak* of the old stories, it seems to me even more doubtful whether we can understand the purpose of its introduction and development as a mitigation of the direct anthropomorphic theophany. For this there are several reasons. Firstly, the introduction of the *mal'ak* is too extremely spasmodic, and leaves too many fierce anthropomorphisms untouched, for its purpose to be understood in this way. The voice and presence of the *mal'ak* alternates in a number of stories so much with the voice and appearing of Yahweh that it is hardly possible to understand his place as a substitute for the latter. Secondly, far from the *mal'ak* representing a later and more sophisticated feature, it is found deeply embedded in stories of great antiquity; the best example is the J story of Gen. xviii, where to be sure the term *mal'ak* does not appear until xix 1 and there in the plural, but where it is indisputable that we have the same

general phenomenon as the *mal'ak* of other stories. In general, the *mal'ak* passages do not do anything explicit to assert the remoteness or the transcendence of Yahweh or to combat a primitive anthropomorphism. If anything, the *mal'ak* might be better understood as the accompaniment of the anthropomorphic appearance rather than as a dilution of it.

There is however, and I think from very early times, the tradition not so much that the deity is invisible as that it is deadly for man to see him. *mot namut ki 'elohim ra'inu*, says Manoah to his wife, Jud. xiii 22. *lo yir'ani ha-'adam wa-hay*, says God in Ex. xxxiii 20. This line of thought also, it seems to me, should be taken as subsequent to and a mitigation of the anthropomorphic theophanies, but is coeval with them and only partly if at all contradictory. It does not assert that the deity is invisible, but depends on the holiness and awfulness of his aspect which must bring death to men who see him. It is only exceptionally therefore, and to special persons, that God makes himself visible; when he does, as Manoah's wife reasons, one may suppose that he would not have gone to so much bother if it were only to put them to death.

Nothing is indeed more significant about the anthropomorphic theophanies than that they have occurred to special and isolated persons in the past; in historical Israel it is the prophets pretty well alone who experience them. This is, I think, the key to the difference between the anthropomorphic type of appearance and the type of the priestly tradition of *kabod*. The basis of the *kabod* conception is to be seen not only in a priestly cast of mind and thought but in a simple practical aspect, namely that it had to cope with a manifestation which was not only to special persons like patriarchs and prophets but to a larger number of people in a present and repeated cultic situation; and the nature of the manifestation was by fire, light or smoke. I might therefore make some modification in the words of Prof. EICHRODT (*Theol. des. AT*, 2nd. ed., vol. 1, p. 274) that "it is precisely this priestly theologoumenon of the *kabod* that betrays clearly the striving to weaken the sensible perceptibility of God in some way or other into the mere symbol of his presence." For while it may be that such a weakening in fact results from the development of the *kabod* conception, perhaps EICHRODT's sentence suggests too much a deliberate purpose for change, in what was in part a practical accommodation to the real possibilities in the milieu in which priestly cult operated.

In this connection some further observations may be made. Because the priestly *kabod* conception is thus connected naturally with the circumstances in which the cult operated, we can see that it is not just a part of the developed priestly thought as found in P, but goes back to an earlier time; and in particular we note this kind of divine manifestation in the old story from the very beginning of the Solomonic temple (1 K. viii 12-13). Secondly, it seems to me doubtful if the process here leads towards a weakening of the appearance of God into "mere symbol" of his presence. The understanding seems to be rather of a veiled appearance, an appearance in a manner in which no precise lineaments of form can be discerned. Thirdly, it seems to me that the process of priestly thinking moves towards the full *kabod* conception not along the line of the perceptibility or invisibility of God as such, but rather along the line of sin and atonement; it is sin and holiness which form the barrier to the full perception of the deity, and atonement which concentrates the *kabod* appearance in the sanctuary.

At this point we should say something of the remarkable passage Exod. xxxiii, which is no doubt the most sophisticated and delicate discussion of the seeing of God by man in the OT. Practically all the presentations, if we may so call them, of the deity are here used in one passage — *mal'ak*, *panim*, *kabod*, *tub*, and *shem*. It is most unlikely that source division on literary grounds could separate them all out, though it may well be that separate traditions lie behind different themes; e.g. it may well be a traditional theme that Moses spoke to God *panim 'el panim* (v. 11) which the writer has incorporated without making plain how it agreed with the statement below (v. 22) that Yahweh's face cannot be seen; within his present total composition (he must mean) by *panim 'el panim* the directness of speech which a man has with his fellow, although Yahweh is veiled from sight by being in the *'ammud be-'anan* (v. 9).

It is of first interest, however, to notice that in this chapter the problem is not really the problem of anthropomorphism as such, and the employment of the presentations, *panim*, *mal'ak*, and so on, is not here directed towards avoiding or mitigating a *human* form for Yahweh's appearing. It seems clear that the passage was written for its context, that is, to follow immediately after the incident of the sin of Israel in making the golden calf. The problem is therefore: how can Yahweh now go with Israel on their journey? The danger is that if he goes with them personally, he will consume them—clearly, because of their rebelliousness. Therefore he will send his *mal'ak*

before them, and his *panim* will go with them. But Moses insists that Yahweh must go with them, and that he, Moses, must be assured of the good pleasure in which he stands. Then Moses goes on to ask to be shown the *kabod* of Yahweh, and there follows the familiar scene where Moses sees the *'ahor* but not the *panim*. Two points should be noticed: firstly, that the problem which interests the writer is not that of anthropomorphism and transcendence but that of sin and atonement in relation to (a) the accompanying presence and (b) the vision or appearance of Yahweh. Secondly, that the final statement of the process of theophany, where the whole *tub* of the deity passes by, but the *panim* is screened and only the *'ahor* made visible, is probably in close agreement with the early type of temple theophany which we know from the story of Solomon; and in fact the whole story probably comes from the time of Solomon or soon after, though it uses numerous older motifs and catchphrases. The predominance of sin and atonement as the real problematic behind the theophany is seen from the *pen 'akel'eka* of v. 3. and much more from the *we-hannoti 'et-'asher 'ahon we-rihamti 'et 'asher 'arahem* of v. 19.

The same theme of holiness, sin and atonement appears of course in some of the prophetic theophanies, most expressly in Is. vi 5-7, itself of course influenced by temple cult. We have already mentioned that the older tradition of direct and anthropomorphic theophany to particular persons lives on in the prophetic movement. It is interesting here also to see that in earlier prophecy such as that of Amos there is little attempt at direct description of the theophanic appearance, although an erect figure of human likeness seems clearly implied. In Is. vi, however, while the impression of a human likeness remains, the actual description concentrates, as in Exod. xxiv 4-11, on the surroundings, the train, the seraphim, the smoke. Yahweh is here sitting, not standing. Though the figure may be of human likeness, the main impression given is of something above and beyond the human. It is all the more interesting, therefore, in the still later Ezekiel, where the theophany is still more strongly influenced by cultic practice and gives an even stronger impression of something above and beyond the human, to find in the end (Ezek. i 26) an explicit statement of a human likeness at the centre. Within the theophanic apparition, he says, there was a *raqia'*, and above it, like the *mar'eh 'eben-sappir*, was a *demit kisse'*, and upon this similitude of a throne was *ke-mar'eh 'adam*. It would seem that at this late time when the interest in theophanic description is stronger and when the general impression made is more remote from the ordinary human, the tradi-

which it evokes in Israelite contexts is much greater because iconic representations of the deity are, if not unknown, at any rate abnormal or not regulative for the general trend of thought. The God whom Israel worships appears, if he wills to appear at all, in living human likeness. Anthropomorphism in the strict sense, in the sense of the appearance of God in human shape, depends for Israel in the earliest stages we can trace on the memory of the ancestors and the meeting of their God with them. Many of these stories will have been transmitted as sacred stories or foundation stories of holy places where these events were remembered. I do not think however they can all be explained in this way; for example, Gen. xviii, in some ways the oldest and most characteristic of them all, is hardly the foundation story of Mamre and seems to me to belong to a longer and more personal story of Abraham.

I do not think we can draw any direct line from this older anthropomorphism to the later passages about the image of God. Thoughts of God appearing in human shape are by no means naturally reversible into thoughts of man sharing the shape of God. But the naturalness, or propriety, of the human likeness for divine appearances when they occasionally do occur, coupled with their comparative rarity, may have been one element in the thinking of those who developed the thought of the *selem 'elohim*. Certainly the word *selem* should lead us towards a kind of manifestation or presentation, such as a statue would perform in an iconic religion, and it might be reasonable to say that interpretations of the Image among modern theologians, as apart from OT scholars, have tended to make the Image too much a relatedness, a capacity, an adaptability, and too little a likeness, a manifestation.

Finally a point about method. Anthropomorphism in the OT has often drawn attention to itself because of the difficulty and offence it presents to modern thought. Old Testament theology may set itself the task of justifying the OT here, not by special pleading, but by demonstrating the cohesion of OT thought on such matters as an intelligible and comprehensible, if not systematic, whole. It must however be careful to remember that the lines of problematic, and therefore of development in thought, within the OT itself may lie in different directions from those adaptable to, or important for, the task of demonstrating cohesion to the modern mind. In particular, the terms which are readily available for the modern discussion may need redefinition or replacement before they can serve, without a danger of misleading, for the understanding of the OT itself.