

Moses and the Vision of God (Georgios I. Mantzaridis, Professor)

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The vision of God is presented in the Holy Scriptures in two different forms which appear to be mutually exclusive. Some passages characterize the vision of God as an impossibility. In the book of Exodus, for example, God tells Moses: “You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live,”[\[1\]](#) while the psalmist notes that God “made darkness His hiding place.”[\[2\]](#) In the New Testament, the Apostle and Evangelist John writes: “No one has ever seen God”[\[3\]](#), And the Apostle Paul adds that God is He “whom no one has ever seen or can see”[\[4\]](#).



At the same time, however, the Holy Scriptures also detail numerous theophanies. For instance, Jacob says: “For I saw God face to face, and my soul was saved”[\[5\]](#). And of Moses, it is recorded: “Thus the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend”[\[6\]](#). Finally, Job, addressing the Lord, says: “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You”[\[7\]](#). In the New Testament, Christ calls “the pure in heart”[\[8\]](#) blessed because they will see God. And the Apostle John writes: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”[\[9\]](#).

Commenting on these passages, Saint Gregory Palamas notes that theology deems the vision of God impossible, yet simultaneously promotes it. It is considered impossible because God is inconceivable according to His essence. Yet it is advocated because God approaches the world and makes Himself approachable through His energies. Thus, these two things are not contradictory, but rather work in harmony.

God’s inapproachability does not preclude the vision of Him. And the vision of God

does not negate the inaccessibility of His divine essence. As a created being, Moses was unable to see the person of the uncreated God, so he was placed “in the cleft of the rock,” and covered by the hand of God while His glory passed by; afterwards, he was able to see His back. As soon as the Prophet Elijah sensed the presence of God, he covered his face with his cloak. And during the Transfiguration of Christ, the apostles who were present were exceedingly afraid and “fell on their faces.”[\[10\]](#)

God’s manifestation to man is not confined to either one mode or one meaning. As Saint Macarius the Egyptian notes, God appeared to each one of the holy Fathers “as He willed and as was meet.” His appearances to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Daniel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and each of the holy prophets were all different. Even God’s various appearances to the same person did not always happen in the same way.

Man is gradually initiated into communion with God and the vision of His glory.

Finally, every theophany in the Old Testament, as a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Word of God, is aimed not only at the person of the persons who sees God, but is part of the divine economy and of the preparation for His coming in the flesh.

Moses was neither the first nor the only person to see God in the Old Testament. God Himself spoke to Moses, saying: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as their God, but I did not reveal to them My name.”[\[11\]](#) Thus, even during God’s first manifestation to Moses, He is presented as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At this appearance, in the form of the bush in flames, Moses was awed and wanted to draw near. But as soon as he heard God’s voice from the bush, he turned his face away because he was afraid. When God announced to Moses that He would send him to liberate his people from Egypt, Moses asked him to reveal His name so that he could identify Him to the Israelites. God then replied: “I AM the Existing One [...]. Thus you shall say to the children of Israel ‘The Existing One sent me to you.’”[\[12\]](#) Thus Moses became the first person who saw God to whom God revealed Himself as the Existing One, i.e. as being and as person or hypostasis. God also manifested Himself to Moses when He gave him the Law, as well as during his journey to the Promised Land. Indeed, Moses was supported throughout the entirety of this long journey by God’s personal companionship. Finally, Moses is presented as a person who has seen God even during the period of the New Testament, when he appears along with the Prophet Elijah at the Transfiguration of the Lord. As has been aptly noted, Moses appears as a representative of the dead, while Elijah represents the living. At the same time, Moses also represents the Law while Elijah is representative of the Prophets. Moses died without reaching the Promised Land, into which Joshua the son of Nun led the

people. Similarly, the Law elapsed as a shadow without manifesting the Kingdom of God, which Jesus Christ inaugurated in the world. Elijah did not die, but was translated into eternal truth. Similarly, prophecy was not abrogated, but fulfilled as irrefutable truth. The vision of God is not some mundane phenomenon in the life and existence of the person who sees Him, much less some personal achievement. Rather, the vision of God comes about as a result of God's movement toward man. As an experience which brings created and finite man into contact with the uncreated and transcendent God, it is usually accompanied with difficult trials. This becomes clear even in the case of Moses, who "having being tried by God and having been found faithful by patiently enduring many temptations, became liberator and leader and king of Israel." It is, indeed, significant that Moses, after his 40-year stay in Egypt, spent another 40 years in exile in order to prepare and shepherd the chosen people for the next 40 years.

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, this series of theophanies led Moses into continually higher knowledge of God. Moses initially saw God "in fire", then later "in darkness". Thus, the closer he came to God, the more he realized that the divine nature was beyond vision. Finally, he came to the tabernacle made without hands, which constitutes the end of his successive elevations towards Him.

And this tabernacle made without hands, according to which he was called to construct the tabernacle made with hands, is Christ, Who pitched "among us the same tabernacle". This theophany, furthermore, has very profound consequences for the soul as well as the body. The inner brightness it brings is also expressed in the body of the person seeing God. When Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets of the Covenant after 40 days, the people were awed by his face, which shone from his vision of God and converse with Him.

Ultimately, God, Who cannot be seen even by the angels, became visible to man as the Incarnate Word with His birth from the Virgin. The preparation for the reception and vision of God was deeper and more extensive than the history of Israel and the trials of each of those who saw God. This preparation was, essentially, carried out over the course of the entire history of mankind up to that point, and this is why the Mother of God is referred to as "the cause of all that came before her." The Virgin's anguish, which was prophesied by Symeon, who received Christ at the temple, surpassed that of every other person who saw God. This anguish, however, defeated death once and for all and brought us to the inalienable joy of the resurrection. Symeon experienced a foretaste of this joy, in that, when he beheld the Incarnate Word, he gazed upon death with equanimity.

The vision of God engenders awe in human beings. The three disciples of the Lord

who were with Him at His Transfiguration felt this to an overwhelming extent when they heard the voice from the cloud say: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."[\[13\]](#) Similarly, the soldiers who went to arrest Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, as soon as they heard him say, "'I am he', drew back and fell to the ground"[\[14\]](#).

Saint Gregory Palamas, who is referred to in the service dedicated to him as "another Moses, who was made worthy of the divine darkness on Athos", connects the vision of God with the experience of the mystery of the cross. And this is not limited to the saints of the Church, but extends to all the righteous of the Old Testament, to all the friends of God. The cross of Christ, says this saint, "was already among our forefathers before it ever came into being, because its mystery was working in them."[\[15\]](#) Thus, it was, for Moses, a cross to bring his people out of Egypt and to go where God led them. Just as it was a cross for Abraham to leave his homeland, his family, and his house in order to follow God's direction. The mystery of the cross, in other words, was at work in these situations, just as the Apostle Paul suggests with his phrase: "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."[\[16\]](#) "The world has been crucified to me" is the first stage of the mystery of the cross. The second stage of this mystery is our crucifixion to the world. During this stage, our carnal mind dies away and, with the power of the manifestation and vision of God, the law of sin ceases to operate in our members. Those who look upon God are liberated from the garments of skin, in which sin operates, as we see in the type of Moses, who removed his sandals when he approached the bush in flames.

Liberation from the passions and the carnal mind turns those who see God into universal people, who embrace the whole world within themselves and are ready to offer themselves for others. Thus, Moses proposed his own perdition along with that of the Israelites who sinned if God did not forgive them, while Symeon recognized the baby Christ in the temple as the Saviour of all peoples and peacefully accepted his own death. Finally, the Apostle Paul prayed to be separated from Christ, whom he loved so much, in order to save his fellow-countrymen. And the ascetics of the desert, when they attain to the vision of God, spontaneously pray for the world.

The theophanies of the Old Testament are usually interpreted by the Fathers of the Church as appearances of the second person of the Holy Trinity, which prepare the way and prefigure His Incarnation and His glorious manifestation. The glory of God, which is presented there as light, as a cloud, as a column of fire, as darkness, as a storm, and as a gentle breeze, shone also on Tabor as an inapproachable light. This same glory continues to be manifested to those who are worthy- insofar as they are

able to receive it- even in this present life, with more to be revealed in the future age. Before the Incarnation and the institution of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist the uncreated light illumined externally those who saw God, whereas now that it has been implanted in the faithful and exists within them, it illumines them from the inside.

God revealed Himself with the theophanies of the Old Testament, declaring «I am He». The theophany of the New Testament, which took place through the Incarnation of the Word of God, was completed with Christ's assurance, «I am with you», and with the coexistence of God and man, which renders us gods in all things, "without identity according to essence". By the same token , the visions of God held by the Apostles of Christ, as well as by the saints of the Church, are more perfect than the ones of the Old Testament. These visions of God do not simply reveal God personally or hypostatically, but, together with God, also raise us to the level of true personhood or hypostasis. They are visions of God Whom we see as actual persons and thus become like Him and members of the communion of glorification.

Source: George Mantzaridis, Professor Emeritus of the Theological School of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, «The Holy Scriptures and Modern Man.” *Festschrift in Honor of Professor John D. Karavidopoulos*. Thessaloniki: Pournara, pp. 287-293 [in Greek].

[\[1\]](#) Exodus 33:20.

[\[2\]](#) Psalm 17(18):12.

[\[3\]](#) John 1:18 and 1 Jn 4:12.

[\[4\]](#) 1 Tim 6:16.

[\[5\]](#) Genesis 32:30.

[\[6\]](#) Exodus 33:11.

[\[7\]](#) Job 42:5.

[\[8\]](#) Mt. 5:8.

[\[9\]](#) 1 Jn 3:2.

[\[10\]](#) Mt. 17:6.

[\[11\]](#) Exodus 6:2-3.

[\[12\]](#) Exodus 3:14.

[\[13\]](#) Mt. 17:5.

[\[14\]](#) Jn 18:6.

[\[15\]](#) Saint Gregory Palamas, Homily 11.

[\[16\]](#) Gal. 6:14.