

# The Book of Exodus

From Lecture 10

## Temple as the Image of Man. Manifest Glory and Consuming Fire

...It may be interesting for our further discussion that in his Epistle to the Hebrews Paul more than once emphasizes that there exists “a prototype” of the Tabernacle and all its furniture, of the “pattern” for the mobile Temple of Israelites in the desert. We find the earliest reference to “the pattern” in the Book of Exodus, where the Most High orders Moses:

In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the Tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. (Exodus 25, 9; NRSV)

This regulation is repeatedly given in reference to all the furniture of the Tabernacle and to the Tabernacle itself:

And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

<...>

Then you shall erect the Tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain. (Exodus 25, 40—26, 30; NRSV)

A question arises: what exactly was shown to Moses on the mountain? What “pattern” did he use to create the sacred Tabernacle? Let us read more deeply into the description of what Moses beheld after he ascended Mount Sinai:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,

And they saw the God of Israel. Under His feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.

God did not lay His hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24, 9—11; NRSV)

As it is said in numerous passages of the Bible, God is invisible, He is omnipresent and has no image confined by space. Let us also recollect that man is created exactly “in the image of God” (Genesis 1, 27). We know already (see p. 45) that this passage of the Genesis does not concern the external “image”, but the spiritual pattern of the inner world of man, which consists of such traits of the Godhead as creativity, mind, memory, power, etc. So, Moses and the chief men of the nation, who accompanied him, beheld “the prototype” by which man was created. Since the Tabernacle with all its furniture was supposed to become a kind of a projection of the pattern shown to Moses (Exodus 25, 40), we come to the conclusion that the organization of the Tabernacle was meant to reflect the inner world of man, symbolize his spiritual “organisation”. We shall speak of it in more detail later, and now let us turn back to the vision of God of Israel, which Moses, three priests and seventy of the elders of Israel saw on Mount Sinai.

<...>

So, how did it happen that men “saw God”? Is it possible to see the One Who is invisible, ever-present, nor is limited by space and time? Although we have touched upon this question already (see pp. 249—251), the context of the verses under our consideration brings us back to it again.

For instance, apostle Paul gives God the following definition:

It is He alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light,  
Whom no one has ever seen or can see... (1Timothy 6, 16; NRSV)

Therefore, it is impossible to see God in any circumstances. Evangelist John expresses the same idea more mysteriously, though not less definitely:

No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the  
bosom of the Father, he hath declared Him. (John 1, 18; KJV)

And more:

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us. (1 John 4, 12; NRSV)

We remember the conviction of King David when he speaks about God who possesses no bodily features and is ever-present:

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

<...>

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me.

<...>

Where can I go from Your spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalms 139, 3—10; NRSV)

God is called “invisible” in numerous epistles of the New Testament (see Romans 1, 20; Colossians 1, 15; Hebrews 11, 27; 1 Timothy 1, 17).

The fact that God has no similarity in the world of phenomena and objects is repeatedly and expressively stated by prophets. For instance, Isaiah raises a question from the person of God:

To whom will you liken Me and make Me equal, and compare Me, as though we were alike? (Isaiah 46, 5; NRSV)

Sometimes, in order to express the idea that He is incomparable with any objects or beings of the created world, prophets suggest a metaphoric image of God as if He were a creation of inconceivably gigantic proportions:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

<...>

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, He takes up the isles like fine dust.

Lebanon would not provide fuel enough, nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.

<...>

It is He Who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in... (Isaiah 40, 12—22; NRSV)

In his prayer at the dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem King Solomon plainly and unambiguously testifies to the fact that God cannot be limited by any form or be enclosed in space, and therefore, be figured in any shape.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, much less this House that I have built...

(1 Kings 8, 27; NRSV)

This is not an exhaustive list of verses that provide Biblical evidence of God's being immeasurable, ever-present and invisible, but they are quite sufficient. The Book of Exodus itself contains the Lord's warning addressed to Moses:

"...But," He said, "you cannot see My face; for no one shall see Me and live." (Exodus 33, 20; NRSV)

In our attempt to formulate an answer to this question let us first of all concentrate on the fact that besides the clear statements about God's being invisible and unbounded there is evidence of quite a different sort in the Bible: a significant number of prophets and saints starting with the forefathers "saw God". We do not imply the descriptions of men's conversations with the Almighty, but only those visions that portrayed Him as a visible form, as a definite image and shape. Thus, for instance, in Jacob's famous dream the Lord appeared

“standing above the ladder”, i.e. obviously, in the image of man (Genesis 28, 13, KJV). The Psalms portray the Almighty as the King sitting on the throne:

The Lord looks down from heaven; He sees all humankind.  
From where He sits enthroned He watches all the inhabitants of the earth...  
(Psalms 33, 13-14; NRSV)

God is pictured sitting “enthroned above the cherubim” in the Book of Psalms (see Psalms 99, 1), and in the prayer of King Hezekiah:

And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said: “O Lord the God of Israel,  
Who are enthroned above the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the  
kingdoms of the earth; You have made heaven and earth. (2 Kings 19, 15;  
NRSV)

In the vision of Micaiah the prophet the Lord is not only sitting on His throne, but as the King, is also surrounded by the hosts of spirits standing beside Him to the right and to the left of Him, and therefore, He is depicted as the one occupying a certain position in space:

Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord  
sitting on His throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside Him to the  
right and to the left of Him. (1 Kings 22, 19; NRSV)

Prophet Isaiah beholds the Lord in the Temple, and His robe fills the whole of the Temple, and the angels are standing around Him:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne,  
high and lifted up, and His train filled the Temple.  
Above it stood the seraphims... (Isaiah 6, 1-2; NRSV)

Prophet Amos beholds the Lord “standing beside the altar”, and therefore, situated in quite a definite place and position (Amos 9, 1). The Almighty was beheld in a vision by prophet Daniel in the image of an Old Man in white clothing enthroned on the Day of the Judgement:

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took His throne, His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool; His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and flowed out from His presence. A thousand thousands served Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending Him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

(Daniel 7, 9—10; NRSV)

We come across a similar vision in John's Book of Revelation in the New Testament:

At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with One seated on the throne!

And the One seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. (Revelation 4, 2—3; NRSV)

Besides, in the spiritual world — the place of “the throne” beheld by apostle John — spatial laws are in action, which are quite different to those valid here, in our physical world. For example, two beings (or to be more precise, spirits — the One seated and the Lamb) may be present in the same place without fusing, pressing or running into each other (Revelation 5, 6–7), whereas one and the same being may be in different places simultaneously (four living creatures “around the throne”, and “on each side of the throne” — Revelation 4, 6; KJV).

Thus, not only the words we have read in Exodus 24, 10, but also many other descriptions of Theophany (i.e. the manifestation of God to man) found in the Bible, seemingly contradict its own statements about God's being invisible and unbounded...

In order to gain at least a very superficial insight into this question, let us pay our attention to the fact that the verb ראה <raá> (“to see”, “to behold”), as well as the verb אכל <a'khál> (“to taste”) which we considered before, is used in the Bible not only in its literal sense, but also figuratively, denoting in this case “to comprehend”, “to assure oneself”, “to perceive” (not necessarily through the five senses).

Thus, King Solomon in his Book of Ecclesiastes takes turns to use either the verb יָדַע <yadá> (“to learn”, “to perceive”, “to make sure”) or רָאָה <raá> (“to see”) for the description of one and the same type of perception (see Ecclesiastes 3, 12 and 3, 22; 4, 1 and 7, 23; 1, 14 and 1, 17, etc.). For example, Solomon’s statement

I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. (Ecclesiastes 1, 14; NRSV)

cannot refer to physical sight — here it should naturally be understood as experiencing and reasoning.

Another case where experiential comprehension rather than literal seeing is meant can be found in King Abimelech’s address to Isaac:

...We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you...  
(Genesis 26, 28)

A range of extracts of the Scripture speak of spiritual sight, quite different from the physical one, which enables man to see spiritual beings, angels for instance:

Then Elisha prayed: “O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6, 17; NRSV)

The books of the New Testament describe some cases of spiritual seeing, when one can perceive the inner condition of this or that person. Thus, for example, Peter says to the ungodly magus Simon:

Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.  
For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.”  
(Acts 8, 22—23; NRSV)

The first martyr Stephen accused by the council of priests suddenly saw God and Jesus standing beside Him:

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7, 55—56; NRSV)

So, in accordance with the style of narration full of visual imagery, which is generally typical for the Bible, the verb “to see” is often used in its figurative sense. Therefore, the expression “to see God” can be understood in the meaning of “arriving at God”, “beholding God’s mysteries”, “assuring oneself”, etc.

Also the paragraph under our consideration (Exodus 24, 11) speaks of some direct “seeing”, “contemplation”, though of a pure spiritual kind, which is typical of prophets who are able to view both distant places and events, which are to take place in the future (see Numbers 24, 17; 1Kings 22, 17; Daniel 7, 7; John 1, 48—51). And if it is so, then in what sense can a prophet see the invisible God?

A partial answer can be found in the Book of Ezekiel, who describes “the vision” of “the chariot of God” in the following way:

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. (Ezekiel 1, 26; NRSV)

And further:

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.  
When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of Someone speaking.  
He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.  
(Ezekiel 1, 28 — 2, 1; NRSV)

The expression translated as “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” in the original goes like this: “Mar’é demút kevód-Adonái”. The word מראה <mar’é> means “vision”, something being contemplated”; דמות <demút> — “likeness”, from the verb דמה <damá> — “to become similar”, “to be alike”, “to be identical”; כבוד <kevód> — “glory”, “honour”, “majesty”; the word “the Lord” stands for the Tetragrammaton, as it has already been mentioned.

So, in his prophetic inspiration Ezekiel did not view the Lord Himself (who, naturally, cannot be seen), but some kind of “a projection” of the Godhead, its “reflection”, “likeness”, besides, it is at least three “stages” removed from the Prototype. If the Almighty is the prototype, his “glory” is a kind of a reflection of God’s image, “the likeness of the glory” is the reflection of the reflection, and the appearance of this likeness is the third stage of, “recession” and “concealment” of the Godhead. Consequently, the prophet does not “behold” the Prototype, but some Figure, which strikes with divine awe as if defining the place, which is taken by the Creator Himself in the vision — the Image, which “substitutes” for him, for the Invisible One. Keeping this in mind, we may understand such seemingly contradicting provisions of the Torah as the Lord’s address to Moses:

...You cannot see My face; for no one shall see Me and live.  
(Exodus 33, 20; NRSV)

— and His words describing the prophetic status of Moses himself:

And He said, “Hear My 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; he is entrusted with all My house.  
With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the  
form of the Lord... (Numbers 12, 6—8; NRSV)

Moreover, the final part of the Torah contains the following statement:

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord  
knew face to face... (Deuteronomy 34, 10; NRSV)

However, Exodus 24, 9—11 says that the Lord was beheld on Sinai not only by Moses alone, but also by his companions. From all of the above, we can conclude that all of them had the honour of receiving a prophetic gift, inspiration and vision, and what is more, many of them afterwards had the prophetic capacity established for good.

So the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for Me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the Tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put It on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.

<...>

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put It on the seventy elders; and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.  
(Numbers 11, 16—25; NRSV)

Besides, the context of the verses in hand (Exodus 24, 9—11) makes it clear that the people who ascended Mount Sinai only “saw” “the closest” to the earthly world “part” of the Godhead — His “feet” and “the pavement” (verse 10), but not His Face. And what they figured as “the heaven” above, or the highest, was just the pavement under the feet of the God of Israel...