

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

6-1-1956

The Biblical Teaching of the Visio Dei- A General Overview of its Scope and its Implications for the Christian

Richard William Baldes

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_baldesr@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baldes, Richard William, "The Biblical Teaching of the Visio Dei- A General Overview of its Scope and its Implications for the Christian" (1956). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 485.

<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/485>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

THE BIBLICAL TEACHING OF THE VISIO DEI:
A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ITS SCOPE AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Exegetical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

Richard William Baldes

June 1956

Approved by:

Victor Bartling
ADVISOR

Harold H. Sherman
Reader

SHORT TITLE

THE SCRIPTURAL VISION OF GOD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING OF THE <u>VISIO DEI</u>	5
III.	THE CONTRIBUTION OF JESUS' BEATITUDES TO THE <u>VISIO DEI</u> IN THE CHRISTIAN HOPE	20
IV.	THE THOUGHT OF THE <u>VISIO DEI</u> IN 1 JOHN 3:2-3	38
V.	SOME EARLY NON-CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON THE <u>VISIO DEI</u>	59
VI.	CONCLUSION	77
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	80

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problem with which this thesis will concern itself is that of the Biblical teaching concerning the vision of God. Logically there are two possibilities involved. Either the inherent invisibility of God must break down to allow for such a vision of God, or this vision of God is an unreal concept; it really doesn't happen. The purpose of this thesis will be to examine Scriptures and from them try to determine which of these possibilities is the correct one, or whether there is really another possibility. As this study develops it will hardly be possible to neglect the implications which this vision has for the life of the Christian.

This study became interesting to the writer particularly as he started trying to think through this concept of the vision of God and also attempt to match it with clear passages of Scripture which state that God cannot be seen. It was beneficial in more than one way. Not only did it put the teaching of the visio Dei into a more clear frame of reference. But as it also touched on other phases of Christian teaching, on faith, on ethics, on eschatology in general, and on realized eschatology, it also helped to clarify these. It was indeed a worthwhile and rewarding study.

When the term "vision" is used in this thesis, when Jesus and John speak of seeing God, the writer is working under the assumption that there is an element of "seeing" involved in this. It shall not be within the scope of this study to try to determine exactly what percentage of this vision is to be spiritualized, and what percentage is actual seeing. That is a question which can only be answered on the other side of the grave. Suffice it to say that in this term "vision" as it is ordinarily used here an element of both "seeing" and of "spiritual seeing" are present.

The writer is also assuming that the First Epistle of St. John was written by the "beloved disciple," John, who also wrote the Fourth Gospel.

In pursuing this study first to be considered will be the Old Testament concept of this vision; and there the writer will try to cover some of the highlights which seem pertinent to this study, such as the visions of the prophets, of Moses, and that spoken of by Job.

In the New Testament the writer has chosen Jesus' saying in Matthew 5:8 and John's assertion in 1 John 3:2-3 as fairly representative of the New Testament promise of the visio Dei. Paul too has much to say about this vision, but it seems to be essentially the same as what Jesus and John have to say in these passages. Where Paul adds something or presents a matter more clearly that will be brought in in its proper place in the surveys of these passages of Jesus

and John.

The writer has examined Jesus' saying as it is related to the whole context of the Beatitudes and John's assertion against the background of his other sayings on this subject.

Finally, in order to see these statements of Jesus and of John in their proper light, there are presented some of the non-Christian teachings about this vision of God that were current around that time.

Some of the major sources used in this study, beside the Bible and other primary sources, were the article by Wilhelm Michaelis on $\delta\rho\alpha\omega$ in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament and the book entitled The Vision of God by Kenneth Escott Kirk. Although Kirk declares openly that he is a mystic, the source references in his book were extremely helpful and many of his conclusions were very fair.

In general then this study has convinced the writer that the teaching of the vision of God is a uniform one in the Bible. The Old Testament does not present that teaching as clearly as the New. But the teaching of Jesus and that of John does have its roots firmly planted in the Old Testament teaching on this subject. This vision of God is intimately linked with faith in Jesus. It is at the same time present now and also is yet to come. It is primarily an act of God. It takes place through Jesus Christ, the only Revealer of God. This, in short, is the way in which Scripture talks of this vision. And it is along this line that

the thought in this study runs.

THE FIRST PART OF THE STUDY OF THE HINDU RELIGION

Introduction

The word "Hindu" is a name given to the people of the Indian sub-continent. It is a name which has been used for centuries and has become a part of the common vocabulary of the world. The word is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sindhu" which means the river Indus. The people who lived in the valley of the Indus were called "Sindhu" and the word "Sindhu" was used to refer to the people of the Indian sub-continent. The word "Hindu" is a name which has been used for centuries and has become a part of the common vocabulary of the world. The word is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sindhu" which means the river Indus. The people who lived in the valley of the Indus were called "Sindhu" and the word "Sindhu" was used to refer to the people of the Indian sub-continent.

The purpose of this study is to

In the history of the world, the word "Hindu" is used to refer to the people of the Indian sub-continent. The word is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sindhu" which means the river Indus. The people who lived in the valley of the Indus were called "Sindhu" and the word "Sindhu" was used to refer to the people of the Indian sub-continent. The word "Hindu" is a name which has been used for centuries and has become a part of the common vocabulary of the world. The word is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sindhu" which means the river Indus. The people who lived in the valley of the Indus were called "Sindhu" and the word "Sindhu" was used to refer to the people of the Indian sub-continent.

THE SECOND PART OF THE STUDY OF THE HINDU RELIGION

CHAPTER II

THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING OF THE VISIO DEI

Introduction

The words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,"¹ were spoken by Jesus and were repeated in substance, if not actually, by the apostles and by the Church that walked in the footsteps of the apostles. As we hear them, the question then arises: "How did this statement strike the people who heard it, people who were rooted in Old Testament thinking?" It is with this question that this chapter will concern itself: the Old Testament view of "seeing God."

The Nature of this "Seeing"

As we examine the nature of this "seeing," we must honestly face the fact that in the Old Testament God did reveal Himself in ways perceptible to the sensory organs of man. One of the terms used to express this idea is the term "glory." For instance, in Exodus 16:7,10 we hear: "Then shall ye see the glory of the Lord," and "the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud." In connection with this and other similar passages Richardson can state: "The 'glory of God' is, in

¹Matt. 5:8.

effect, the term used to express that which men can apprehend, originally by sight, of God on earth."² We may then conclude that this "glory" is something that was seen in the ordinary sense of that term. Frocksch makes this point when he says: "Richtig aber ist, dasz der k'bôd jahvè kein Abstraktum ist, sondern eine Erscheinung andeutet, also eine Gottesoffenbarung enthält."³

Again, we may note that God revealed Himself through natural phenomena, or even in the form of a human being. In the former category there might be included such incidents as the appearance to Moses in the burning bush, accompanying Israel in their exodus as a pillar, and The Interpreter's Bible would also include the manna which God sent down: "The manna, actually a natural phenomenon in the desert, will be the mark of the presence of God."⁴

In the latter category the list includes various appearances to people in human form and possibly also as "the Angel of the Lord" in the passages incorporating this title. In either of the above cases the statement of Heinisch would

²Alan Richardson, A Theological Word Book of the Bible (New York: Macmillan Company, c.1950), p. 175. See also Paul Heinisch, Theology of the Old Testament, translated by William Heidt (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, c.1950), p. 66, where there is a listing of these "glory" passages.

³Otto Frocksch, Theologie des Alten Testaments (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1950), p. 430.

⁴Editorial Board, The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon--Cokesbury Press, 1952), I, 951.

hold true: "These apparitions are not explained as an inner experience that took place in the mind of those to whom God revealed Himself,"⁵ for they appeared not only to single persons, but other persons were also present and saw the manifestation, as was the case with Sarah, when God came to talk to Abraham.⁶

Once we have said that when God reveals Himself there is something to be actually seen, we must at once add that there is also an element of "not seeing" involved in this "vision," for it is said that the essence of God is not seen; He is without form and exempt from every limitation of space.⁷ God may be present, but He cannot be seen face to face; we may call it the "glory of God," which can be seen, but that is not synonymous with God Himself. The fact remains that God's essential being cannot be disclosed in the glory that is made manifest. "Moses will see God's glory, but not His face; he can know His will, but not plumb His mystery."⁸

Though God appears in and through natural phenomena, He

⁵Heinisch, op. cit., pp. 65-66.

⁶Gen. 18.

⁷Gf. Gustav Friedrich Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament, translated by George E. Day (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1883), p. 127.

⁸The Interpreter's Bible, op. cit., p. 1075.

still is not identical with such phenomena. In connection with the incident of the burning bush it is stated, "but saw no similitude" (Dout. 4:12). Procksch, in his book, distinguishes between the "being" and the "doing" of God; it is only the latter which can be seen. "Das Wesen ist übersinnlich," but "so soll Jahves Wesen in seiner Unsichtbarkeit zum Ausdruck gebracht werden, während sein Wirken höchst sichtbar im Gewitter veranschaulicht wird."⁹ Seeing these natural phenomena, this Wirken of God, still is not equivalent to seeing God, to actually seeing His essence.

When these phenomena occur in which the Lord reveals Himself, not only physical seeing occurs, but also spiritual seeing. "Das Gewitter ist nur das Kleid, das ihre Gestalt umhüllt; sie selbst [the glory of God] kann . . . nur mit pneumatischen Augen geschaut werden."¹⁰ Heinisch cites a number of passages in which seeing the face of God definitely has a spiritual connotation, where a "spiritual seeing" seems to be implied.¹¹ Commenting on Exodus 3:4, Michaelis remarks that it "bedeutet: sich jemandem als sein Gott

⁹Procksch, op. cit., p. 138.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 83.

¹¹cf. Heinisch, op. cit., p. 66; see especially Num. 6: 25-26, and other passages where it is used in a figurative sense.

bezeugen."¹² In other words, in these visions there is, beside the actual seeing, some spiritual seeing that goes on, seeing with the heart, the seeing of faith.

Seeing God in the full sense of that term, seeing the very face of God, would be impossible; it would mean death, and for that reason it is denied even to such an exceptional man as Moses. God explicitly states: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live."¹³ The Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, and to Manoah and his wife; Isaiah saw God in his inaugural vision and they all admit that the sight should have killed them.¹⁴

This being killed at the sight of God is spoken of for two reasons. The first and minor one is to set definite limitations on the materialization of anthropomorphizing God. The Old Testament writers had to speak in anthropomorphisms about God, but still had to preserve the face of His majesty;¹⁵ hence they spoke with great caution and reverence about this "seeing of God." This is the point that Kirk makes when he says: "The same instinct of reverence which led the Jew to avoid pronouncing the sacred name led

¹² Wilhelm Michaelis, *ὁράω* in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), V, 332.

¹³ Exodus 33:20.

¹⁴ Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isaiah 6:5.

¹⁵ The Interpreter's Bible, op. cit., II, 354.

him to deny that any living man could see God."¹⁶

But why this extreme caution? Why must it mean death to see God? The reason for this threat of death was not in man, but in God. For, on the one side, we have God in all His glory and majesty; and, on the other, there stands man in all his sin and unworthiness. Put them together face to face, and you have the inevitable result that "der Mensch Gott nicht sehen kann, ohne in seiner ganzen Existenz vernichtet zu werden."¹⁷ It is like putting free hydrogen in the presence of an open flame; the two natures are of such a sort that the former cannot exist in the presence of the latter without being blown out of existence. Those who may have seen God, have only been spared such a destruction by a special intervention of the grace of God.¹⁸

Now, when a revelation of God does take place in which God, His will, His ways, or His thoughts take on a plastic and visually perceptible form, then it is always God who is the Revealer. In this situation, man is nothing; God is all. The mere fact that a man has had such a vision or dream means nothing. The all-important fact, which is so magnificent and comprehensive, is that it is God that is doing the

¹⁶Kenneth Escott Kirk, The Vision of God (London: Longmans Green, 1931), p. 12.

¹⁷Michaelis, op. cit., p. 332.

¹⁸Exodus 24:11.

revealing. It is His act of grace, and His alone.¹⁹

Der Mensch ist immer nur Empfänger, nie Veranlasser der Offenbarung. . . . Vielmehr "zeigt" Gott den Propheten. Hier liegt ein wichtiger Unterschied auch gegenüber dem in den Mysterienreligionen und in der Gnosis heimischen Bestreben, durch Kontemplation oder äußerlichere Methoden zur Schau zu gelangen.²⁰

The Persons Who Do this "Seeing"

This brings us over to thoughts about the person that receives such a vision or such a revelation. The first ones that we think about are the prophets. The two titles by which they are known in this connection as "seers" are $\overline{\text{סֵיִר}} \overline{\text{וּנְבִיָא}}$ and $\overline{\text{סֵיִר}} \overline{\text{וּנְבִיָא}}$; these are translated respectively by the Septuagint as $\delta \delta\rho\acute{\omega}\nu$ and $\delta \beta\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\pi\lambda\omega\nu$. Both of these names, according to Procksch, denote the same thing, namely, that such a revelation of God is given them in a visually perceptible form.²¹

In general, what these prophets saw in such a revelation of God, though it was visual in nature, was primarily a revelation or impartation of God's will. They do not fully and completely see God, but God does make His will known to them as He speaks and communicates to them in visions.

Oehler's remark seems to be correct when he states: "What

¹⁹See Deut. 13:1-5; and also Amos 7:12 where Amos is called $\delta \delta\rho\acute{\omega}\nu$ by the Septuagint in this very connection.

²⁰Michaelis, op. cit., p. 330.

²¹Procksch, op. cit., p. 129.

the prophet perceives is דְּבַר־יְהוָה (the word of Jehovah); such words of revelation fall under the notion of $\text{רָאָה$ in the wider sense. When the image takes a plastic form, vision in the stricter sense takes place."²²

Various prophets are definitely spoken of as seeing God. Isaiah (6:1) directly says: "I also saw the Lord." Beyond that we know nothing of how God did appear to him. No description of God is given.

In 1 Kings 22:19 Micaiah reports a vision of God, but here it is an expression for the "Word of the Lord" which he is to announce to Ahab.²³

Neither does Ezekiel's vision seem to limit the fact that God Himself is not seen in these visions. With all his pictures, he still does not describe the God who speaks to the prophets, nor is this God seen. What is described is, according to Ezekiel 1:28, a "likeness of the glory of the Lord."²³

Only later, in Daniel 7:9, does one find a description of God. There He is described: His "garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like the pure wool; His throne was like the fiery flame, and His wheels as burning fire." But this vision's purpose is not a description--that is entirely beside the point--but the fate of the four kingdoms.

²²Oehler, op. cit., p. 476.

²³Michaelis, op. cit., pp. 329-31.

Besides, these visions are only a literary form and must not be stretched beyond this usage.²³

The vision of Amos 9:1 is apparently only a method of introduction and not an actual seeing of God.²³

Some others to whom the Lord appeared in the Old Testament were such people as Jacob (Gen. 32:30), Hagar (Gen. 16:13-14), and the elders of Israel (Ex. 24:9-11). Besides, God personally accompanied Israel, His chosen people, on their desert journey (Ex. 33:14). And here again, as was mentioned earlier, these were not a direct seeing of God.

Now, one of the main people, of whom it is said that they saw God, is Moses. There are two passages of particular importance in this connection, Numbers 12:8 and Exodus 33:20-23. In the first, God says: "With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold." Here the immediate view of the Divinity ($\text{אֱלֹהִים} \text{ פָּנָיו}$) with which Moses was favored stands much higher than these other forms of "seeing God" which have been mentioned so far, such as dreams and visions. "The contrast intended is that of the indirectness of visions, ecstasies, and dreams with the immediacy of communication in speech."²⁴ The immediacy here is not the immediacy of the pure vision of God, but the im-

²³Michaelis, op. cit., pp. 329-31.

²⁴The Interpreter's Bible, op. cit., II, 202.

mediacy of God speaking to Moses. Michaelis stresses this when he states: "dasz Gott nur mit ihm . . . *στόμα κατὰ στόμα* geredet habe."²⁵

We find a different emphasis in Exodus 33. There, in terms that we cannot fully comprehend, Moses was granted a sight, a direct vision of God of greater intensity than was given to any other man as far as we know. He was given a sight into the very invisibility of God by a special and unique act of the grace of God.

Möglich ist dies nur, indem Jahves Hand beim Vorüberfahren Moses Augen bedeckt, so dasz sie sein Angesicht nicht sehen können, aber zugleich geweiht werden, so dasz ihm das von Natur Unsichtbare sichtbar wird.²⁶

And the fact of the uniqueness and intensity of this vision is all the more stressed by the shining of Moses' face after this sight.²⁷

Finally, we must also come to reckon with Job and the vision of God that he proclaims. His is a vision after death. But some scholars seem to reject this. Heinisch, for instance, asserts that "actually the idea of bodily resurrection after death never entered the mind of suffering Job."²⁸ Michaelis, to say the least, is hesitant about

²⁵Michaelis, op. cit., p. 331.

²⁶Procksch, op. cit., p. 425.

²⁷Exodus 34:29.

²⁸Heinisch, op. cit., p. 265.

accepting it on the grounds that in the Old Testament there is little room for life after death.²⁹

But, in spite of their objections, the evidence pointing to the fact that this confronting God will take place after death seems to be convincing. The very emphasis in the text³⁰ on seeing God after death is so strong that it hardly seems possible to deny such a life after death. Job does not look for a material manifestation of God similar to or greater than the one granted to Moses. He was looking to see that glory of God which does not tear away the veil of mystery and incomprehensibility of God, but that glory which is and can only be perceived in such a mystery.³¹

Job was in a state of what men might call misery and sorrow, unhappiness at its height. And in this context of life he rose head and shoulders above his circumstances and proclaimed his confidence in an answer to his situation that might possibly not be found in this life, but will be found with God in a new life to come.

As Yahweh will appear at the eschatological time ('the last') to save Israel in her extremity, so also will God appear to Job; and it will be His judgment, not

²⁹Michaelis, op. cit., p. 334.

³⁰Job 19:25-27.

³¹Cf. Procksch, op. cit., p. 383; see also Artur Weiser, Das Buch Hiob, in Das Alte Testament Deutsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1951), XIII, 151.

that of men, which will constitute the final act of the drama.³²

Job knew that in Sheol human existence is not what might be called "life" and "yet he believed that in some way he would receive new flesh for the specific purpose of the divine--human interview."³³

Some Implications

The implications of this Old Testament visio Dei are indeed interesting. But because of its deep mystery, the Old Testament man was reluctant to speak very dogmatically about it. As a result this concept of seeing God had become very subdued in Israel. Nevertheless, it is by no means absent from their thought.

First of all we learned that time and again such a vision had taken place, for the prophets and for other men. In these cases it was an action of God toward them, a gracious act, for otherwise they should have perished because of the sight. It was God revealing Himself, and not primarily an act of man. Nor was that a full vision, a direct face to face seeing of God, which was even denied to Moses.

But that full vision already in the Old Testament was

³²The Interpreter's Bible, op. cit., III, 1052, quoting Artur Weiser.

³³Ibid. pp. 1055-56.

reserved for the Last Day, for eschatology. From Job's statement of faith in 19:26-27 we can learn that at least he, and very likely others, believed that he would be granted such an eschatological sight of God. He realized that after this life was ended he would be raised from the dead--he knew not how--and then see this full vision of God with his own eyes.³⁴ The Book of Daniel also adds its witness to an individual resurrection.³⁵ On the whole we must grant that the eschatological event is strongly spoken of in terms of seeing. Kittel remarks: "Alttestamentlichem Vorbild entspricht es, wenn im ganzen Neuen Testament die Eschatologie nicht als Hören, sondern überwiegend als Schauen beschrieben wird."³⁶

Then we may note that there is a present working ethics connected with this eschatological vision. Psalm 17:15 declares: "I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form." The Interpreter's Bible comments on this verse to the effect that because of righteousness of life we will enjoy God's favor of seeing His face.³⁷ Add to this the witness of

³⁴Cf. Procksch, op. cit., p. 380.

³⁵Dan. 12:2-3.

³⁶Gerhard Kittel, ἀκούω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933), I, 221.

³⁷Cf. The Interpreter's Bible, op. cit., IV, 91.

Psalm 24, verses 3 and 6: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . . such is the generation of those who seek the face of the God of Jacob," and we may safely therefore connect an ethics to this eschatological vision.

But how can one have such a pure heart in the face of the declaration of the Psalmist: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified"?³⁸ That is the very reason why man in this life cannot have such a vision of God, because in the perfect communion of this vision man in his complete unworthiness and sinfulness must be annihilated in the presence of the full vision of the absolutely holy and just God.³⁹ The only way in which man can attain a pure heart and thus become capable and worthy of such a vision is through an act of the grace of God, only if God makes the heart pure. David recognizes this as the sole ability of God as he declares: "Create in me a clean heart, O God."⁴⁰

While man is in this present life of sin that absolute purity of heart does not exist; now we must still fear the full vision of God because of our uncleanness even as Isaiah did.⁴¹ But that Last Day will come on which God will

³⁸Psalm 143:2.

³⁹cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 332.

⁴⁰Psalm 51:10.

⁴¹Isaiah 6:5.

cleanse human hearts completely. Then will the full visio Dei come to pass. "Schauen Gottes wird eschatologisches Geschehen, das dann erfolgt, wenn Jahwe zum Zion kommt und die Menschen nicht mehr 'unreiner Lippen' sind."⁴²

Once we see these thoughts inherent in the Old Testament, then we come very close to Jesus' statement: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,"⁴³ which is also strongly eschatological. As is often said of the Ten Commandments, so may also be said of this statement of Jesus, that He gave this concept of the Old Testament visio Dei its true meaning, for only in Him is the true vision of God revealed, for "no man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him."⁴⁴

⁴²Kittel, op. cit., p. 218.

⁴³Matt. 5:8.

⁴⁴John 1:18.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTRIBUTION OF JESUS' BEATITUDES TO THE VISIO DEI IN THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

The Beatitudes as a Whole

The incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, that act in which the Mighty Ruler of the universe directly entered history, is the crucial point in all of our Christian living, action, and thinking. And any thought, word, or writing of man which aspires to utter some word of wisdom that is true wisdom, must reflect this Jesus who is the Truth. This is particularly so when we want to say anything about eschatology, when we ask the questions: "What will happen then?" "To what extent will we be able to see God?" "How will that differ from what we are now experiencing?" "Will it differ at all?"

So it is that in our investigation of the visio Dei as a Christian hope, we turn for information to Jesus. That information we find most clearly articulated in the Beatitudes, more particularly in the exclamation of Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). That is a promise straight from the lips of our Savior: they shall see God. But that promise does not stand alone, isolated from the rest of Scriptures, or even from the rest of the Beatitudes. The minimum of scholarly fair-

ness requires that we examine that statement in its context.

These Beatitudes must be taken as a whole. They are not eight steps that a person must take in order to achieve the blessings of God, nor eight stages through which he must pass, but much rather they are eight aspects of discipleship. It is like looking at a diamond from various directions; you may see a different facet, but you are looking at the same diamond. This then is the unity which ties these Beatitudes together, a unity which cannot be broken without doing violence to the whole. We must remember this principle: "Die einzelnen Verheisungen lassen sich nicht voneinander trennen."¹

In the form of these various Beatitudes Jesus is telling His disciples that He and He alone is the real Helper and Comforter in all phases of life. These Beatitudes are taken as a complete unit, for as such they apply to the whole of one's being; they do this because the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims is one which involves utter and unreserved commitment and devotion to God's rule.² In them the eschatological outlook is that force which governs the conduct and attitude of the individual believer; but such an

¹A. Schlatter, Der Evangelist Matthäus (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1948), p. 141.

²Cf. Hans Windisch, The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount, translated by S. Machean Gilmour (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, c.1951), p. 29.

attitude toward the Last Things never lacks an inner relation to the God who promises salvation, and to that salvation itself.³

Jesus here promises happiness or blessedness, but the blessedness here described goes much deeper than "happiness" as we ordinarily think of it, an emotion which merely rides on the surface of our lives, shifting and changing with every wind of circumstance. It is rather true, abiding happiness, a joy which reaches down and grasps the soul of an individual. It is "that blessedness which the world cannot give and which the world cannot take away;" it "depends on inward condition rather than on outward circumstance."⁴ This blessedness consists in being in a covenant relationship with the Almighty Loving God, in having the Kingdom of God reigning in a person through faith in Christ Jesus. Note that these Beatitudes begin and end with that same promise of the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵

In this first section (verses 3-6) of the Beatitudes, Jesus, in speaking to people who are only too well aware of their utter spiritual needs, promises them the salvation al-

³ Cf. Windisch, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴ Ernest Trice Thompson, The Sermon on the Mount and its Meaning for Today (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, c.1946), p. 41.

⁵ See Matt. 5:3 and 10.

ready proclaimed of old.⁶ He promises them a full and complete reward in the age to come upon them soon, a promise that their spiritual lack will be filled up. And yet they are blessed now, for that gift is theirs already. As contrary to all perceptible facts as it may seem to be, theirs is now the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the next section (verses 7-10) Jesus speaks of things which these members of God's Kingdom are to do, the kind of influence that they are to have. To balance the privileges and varied blessings that He has already mentioned, Jesus now speaks of their responsibilities. They are to be merciful, pure in heart, have an active concern for peace, and show patient perseverance when persecuted for righteousness' sake.

These Beatitudes and promises belong to those devout persons who have already gone beyond mere yearning, mere self-condemnation, who have already begun to move in the sphere of righteousness.⁷

When we fail to comply with these responsibilities, that does not cast us into despair, but because of their nearness and their intimate connection with the first set of Beatitudes, they cast us back to cling to the Gospel promises held out to the spiritually impoverished. In this second section Jesus speaks of the way in which activity is an

⁶See Isaiah 61:1-3; 55:1; and Psalm 37:11.

⁷Windisch, op. cit., p. 176.

inherent part of the true righteousness and being in the Kingdom of God. The activity is a great "Yea!" to the fact of this redemption. "So wie sich der Mensch vor Gott gestellt weisz, handelt er."⁸

The Visio Dei in Matthew 5:8

And now, with His eye on that great Last Day in which He will personally and visibly come to bring our Christian life to its fulfillment, Christ directs the individual Christian to a pure heart in the sixth Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart." To experience this visio Dei requires a pure heart. This pure heart is an inward motivating force, a force that not only rules a person's outward actions, but even his innermost thoughts. It is such a motivating force that Schlatter has in mind when he thus describes the heart: "καρδία benennt das inwendige Leben nach seiner Einheit. Daher entstehen alle inwendigen Handlungen, sowohl das Denken als das Wollen, im Herzen."⁹

It is a holy purity which loves "the Lord thy God with all thy heart;" and thus is oriented completely to God. Such a heart steers a person away from evil and to follow after faith, charity, and peace;¹⁰ it serves God with con-

⁸ Schlatter, op. cit., p. 137.

⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:22.

tinual prayer, night and day;¹¹ it clings to the mystery of faith.¹² But the individual, no matter how hard he might try to work at it, cannot attain to such a pure heart; all his own efforts must leave him in despair. He must cry out with the Psalmist: "Create in me a clean heart, O God,"¹³ for the purity of such a heart is entirely a work of grace, God's own deed. It is the deed which God has done in Jesus, His incarnate Son, for "no one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has either seen Him or known Him."¹⁴

But, if God's grace reigns in the heart of a Christian here on earth, if God has allowed His purifying grace to shine in his heart, why then does the promise not hold good now in this life: "They shall see God"? The monks of the Medieval Period who aspired to the vision of God had the answer to this question, even though their solution was wrong. It is sin; there seems to be constantly with us "some hidden impurity which destroys our fellowship with God."¹⁵ Sin, which is constantly with us, is that polluting agent which infects our hearts and makes purity impossible. Sin keeps us from the vision. This is what Paul is thinking

¹¹2 Tim. 1:3.

¹²1 Tim. 3:9.

¹³Psalm 51:12.

¹⁴1 John 3:6.

¹⁵Thompson, op. cit., p. 37.

of when he states in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." So it is that the true vision must be pushed off until the Last Day; it is eschatological.

But, inasmuch as the reign of God does have a foothold in a Christian, that vision even in this life is not completely absent. Paul says that we see dimly; he does not say that we do not see at all. Seeing God on the Last Day will not differ essentially from our seeing Him right now. In the Kingdom of His glory our view of the living, invisible God must still be nothing more than God revealing Himself to us; likewise now, what we see and hear is nothing more than God revealing Himself to us. In either case it is not our action, we that do the seeing. God reveals. "Das Sehen ist selbst eine Art Hören, nämlich ein Aufnehmen der Offenbarung."¹⁶ God reveals Himself now through His Son, and really to perceive that Revelation is spoken of in terms of seeing,¹⁷ yet not with physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith. So it was also with the Jewish expectation of experiencing the "Heilszeit"; they shall see it.¹⁸ This is the way the Jew thought. He spoke of seeing God as he stood

¹⁶Wilhelm Michaelis, *σείω* in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), V, 348.

¹⁷See Matt. 13:16.

¹⁸Michaelis, op. cit., p. 347.

in the Temple or in the synogogue, or while he was praying, or studying God's Word.¹⁹ So it is that the Christian of today can "see" God, see Him inasmuch as God has revealed Himself to him in His Revelation. To put it in more contemporary terminology: we see Him by faith.

Nevertheless this seeing God in this present time does not deny a more full Revelation in the world to come. The words of Job, the fact that Jesus the incarnate Revelation of God will be there, and the entire expectation of the New Testament seem to indicate that this visio Dei will be one apparent to our own eyes. It is significant that right in the midst of His promises Jesus points us to His Parousia.²⁰ Then, when our hearts have finally been cleansed from all impurities of sin, the personal communion with God which was already ours in part in and through His Revealed Word, will be ours to the fullest extent. We know little more than this about this final vision of God, that we will see Him as He is, see Him through Christ, the only Manifestor of God.

The Beatitudes as an Important and Immediate Context

But this view of the eschatological visio Dei is not

¹⁹Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrash (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), I, 206.

²⁰Schlatter, op. cit., p. 139.

one that is completely isolated from the rest of Jesus' thinking, completely walled off from any other word of our Lord on the subject; it is in perfect harmony with the rest of the Beatitudes. In fact, this view derives some very substantial support from its immediate context.

As long as we are pilgrims and sojourners here in this world of sin, there will always be something blocking our communion with God, something lacking in us. Our Lord's immediate concern is that we recognize that fact; if we do not, our very stubborn blindness to it becomes our own doom. So Christ, with the force of one speaking with authority, again and again harks back to our utter need: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those that mourn . . . the meek . . . those that are starving for righteousness." The poor in spirit are those who are conscious of their abject spiritual poverty, who as beggars fall down on their faces and see only their own complete unworthiness. The meek are those who, when they come face to face with God, are completely subject to His will, who have fully enslaved their wills to His. The hungerers and thirsters after righteousness again are those who see that they have a real need which they cannot fulfill, "welche wissen, dasz sie aus eigener Kraft keine Gerechtigkeit aufzubringen vermögen, die vor Gott gilt."²¹ Finally, those that mourn are such as desire

²¹Strack--Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 201; see also Schlatter, op. cit., p. 137.

the full establishment of God's Kingdom, such as are looking for that comfort which only the Messiah, the true Comforter of Israel,²² can bring; they will mourn until the time when, in the fulfillment of time, God will wipe away all tears from their eyes,²³ when God's Kingdom is fully established, with the Lamb upon the throne. Mourning, hunger and thirst, meekness, and poverty--all in the spiritual sense--are all there simply because the Kingdom of God does not have its full sway yet. And it is also in the existence of these things that we find a reason for a lack of a clear visio Dei.

The blessings which come to the believer, to the one in whom God reigns, are not in the least the action of the believers. Any such thought might be rabbinic, but was not the teaching of Jesus.²⁴ They are blessings which they can receive only and solely through God's own mighty deed.²⁵ This thought re-echoes through every one of the Beatitudes, like a hammer striking an anvil and resounding with the same note, stroke after stroke. "They will be comforted. . . . They will be filled. . . . They will obtain mercy. . . . They will be called sons of God" are all passives and hence "they"

²²See Isaiah 61:1-3 and Jesus' direct application of this passage to Himself in Luke 4:21.

²³Rev. 7:17.

²⁴cf. Schlatter, op. cit., p. 134.

²⁵Ibid., p. 137.

are not the agents. It is God's action. How else can the passive be interpreted? "They will inherit" is again God's action of giving to them. "Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" is in essence God reigning over them--once more, God's action. Once we have grasped that, it is difficult to take "they shall see God" as something in which is only involved an action on man's part, on the part of the "seer." But it is primarily God's action, God revealing Himself to the individual believer.

But further, this action of God toward people is an action which takes place only in and through Jesus Christ. In Matthew 5:3 God promises the Kingdom to His people. But it is in Christ that God's Kingdom becomes incarnate, appears in and among men.²⁶ It is in the person of Jesus that God's βασιλεία is given. Likewise, in the next Beatitude, Jesus is the Comfort for which Israel is looking. "In this frame of reference we may well accept the fact that the name Mönachen, as an equivalent to Tröster, is applied to the Messiah."²⁷ In the concept of inheriting, Jesus is the Heir, in and through Whom we inherit.²⁸ Again, Jesus is the

²⁶See Schlatter, op. cit., p. 133. Note possibly Luke 17:21. See also Gerhard Kittel, ἀκόω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933), I, 221.

²⁷Approximate translation of Strack--Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 195.

²⁸See Gal. 3:16.

Righteousness, for which we hunger and thirst, and with which we will be filled.²⁹ Ultimately He is the answer to all our needs in the first four Beatitudes. Further, He alone is the One in Whom we obtain mercy, and are called the children of God. Then, He too is the One in and through Whom the righteous shall see God. This is also the sense in which we are to understand 1 John 3:2; for, according to Colossians 1:15, where Jesus is the Image of God, and also according to John 1:18, He is the only One Who reveals God.

Now, this action of God is definitely an eschatological one. The Kingdom of God will not really hold its full sway until the Last Day. Now it is still being resisted. But then, at last, will all these promises, which are in the future tense, be completed and perfected in us. Then will our comfort be full and unalloyed;³⁰ then will our inheritance be firmly established;³¹ then will our thirst for righteousness be completely satisfied, and we will obtain and experience the full measure of God's mercy; then will the full consummation of sonship be ours.³² Then alone is it also that we will experience the full vision of God.

Though this Kingdom of God is eschatological, there is

²⁹Jer. 23:6; 33:16.

³⁰Gf. Schlatter, op. cit., p. 135.

³¹Rev. 21:7.

³²Gf. Schlatter, op. cit., p. 140; and also Rom. 8:23.

also what we might call a "realized eschatology;" it is something which already has reality in the present time. In speaking of Matt. 5:3, Schlatter makes this pertinent remark:

Mit dem *ἐστὶν* ragt aber das Zukünftige in die Gegenwart hinein. Dem Armen wird jetzt der Anteil am königlichen Werk Gottes als ein Besitz zugesprochen. . . . Jetzt wird der Anteil am zukünftigen Gut erlangt.³³

So it is that these promises in the future tense are a present reality for believers, for right here in this life the Kingdom of God has gained a foothold on them; they actually do have these promises in Christ Jesus. Therefore comfort,³⁴ inheritance, righteousness, mercy, and the title of "children of God"³⁵ are present possessions of all believers. Again, as we have also seen above, this also applies to the visio Dei; and this idea of a present so-called "vision" is thus not in conflict with the rest of its context in the Beatitudes.

Now the Beatitudes also involve an ethics, a personal, concrete manner of conduct, which is particularly evident in the first halves of the last four Beatitudes. It is an ethics which is practiced in the realm of God's grace, and flows from it naturally. It includes showing Christian mercy toward our fellow men, a mercy which forgives readily

³³Schlatter, op. cit., p. 134.

³⁴cf. Strack--Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 200.

³⁵₁ John 3:2.

and helps in time of need.³⁶ Such a blessed man is also a peacemaker, not only in the sense of making peace between man and his fellow man, eliminating human frictions, but also in the sense of making peace between man and God. The Christian is one who has the great causes of God at heart,³⁷ one who is an instrument of God in bringing that peace which man cannot give. And finally,

it is not strange that Jesus followed this beatitude with one about being persecuted for righteousness' sake. One who would bring about peace in the world must be willing to toil laboriously, to live dangerously, to fight sacrificially, to endure pain and misunderstanding, and, it may be, to face even death itself.³⁸

All these activities are neatly summarized in that very Beatitude which promises the visio Dei, in the words "pure in heart." For purity in heart is that inward condition which expresses itself in these ways. The visio Dei then involves just such an ethics.

Conclusion: The Christian Hope Connected with the Visio Dei

Once God has turned a person to trust solely in His grace, the Christian hopes and longs for the fulfillment of that promise in Him on that Day when God will put off from him his mortality; he yearns for that Day when his partici-

³⁶See Schlatter, op. cit., p. 138; and also Thompson, op. cit., p. 36.

³⁷Thompson, op. cit., p. 39.

³⁸Ibid., p. 39.

pation in Christ reaches its perfect climax, when, by His seeing Christ as He really is, he shall be like Him in the fullest and most complete sense of the term that is possible. Christians, from the moment of their receiving this visio Dei as a possession in Christ, are constantly "looking forward to the day when their Savior will return visibly and take them with Him into eternal glory. That view characterizes the entire life of a Christian."³⁹ Thus the visio Dei is, so to speak, the essence of their hope.

Though it is true that this is eschatological, yet, as eschatology, it also reaches down into the present, into the area of time. For the eschatological future merely brings to completion that which is even now a reality.⁴⁰ In line with this, Pieper, in his comments on 1 Corinthians 13:12, distinguishes between seeing God in this present life and seeing God in yonder life, and comes up with only this difference, that this future seeing is perfect.⁴¹ That future seeing is there a perfection of present seeing. Nygren apparently consents to this view with this statement:

Consequently the Christian faith is unwilling to insert anything into the hope of eternal life other than that

³⁹Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, translated by Walter W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, 84-85.

⁴⁰Cf. Windisch, op. cit., p. 43.

⁴¹Cf. Pieper, op. cit., p. 551.

which is already included in faith in Christ.⁴²

But while this is so, there still is the difference that utter perfection makes. Nygren again emphasizes this when he states:

In his original and sure fashion, Luther says in one place, "It is with us Christians as with a babe in its mother's womb. How could it have any conception of the life which it goes to meet?"⁴³

Yet that hope is tremendously critical in our present life, for the judgment of the world is closely connected with the visible return of Christ in Matthew 25:31-32.

Christ's proclamation as a whole in the Sermon on the Mount is one "that makes the eschatological expectation of judgment and salvation fundamental, the determining factor in passing judgment on life and action, on one's attitude toward men in this life as well as one's attitude toward God."⁴⁴

It is necessary and salutary because as inhabitants of this world believers still commit sins and must constantly be kept aware of those sins; it is necessary in order to keep this hope from being merely a false sense of security, to keep it now a real hope in God.⁴⁵

But now, note that the vision of God in Christ is a

⁴²Anders Nygren, The Gospel of God, translated by L. J. Tinterud (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, c.1951), p. 88.

⁴³Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁴Windisch, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴⁵Cf. Pieper, op. cit., p. 541.

full and perfect one when compared with the one that we have here; therefore, the transforming power that it has is also full. Our whole being in the present "new man according to Christ" will be perfected; our visio Dei is an experience which will exclude all desires for anything else. All that hinders it in the present life will be removed. Gerhard, in his Loci, says:

Just as the angels, because they always behold the face of the Father which is in heaven (Matt. 18:10), are confirmed in the good and freed from the danger of sinning, so the blessed will be perfectly holy and confirmed in the good through and because of the beatific vision of God.⁴⁶

While that final vision will transform the Christian completely, this present "seeing God in part" will also have a similar effect on his life. It transforms to a "radical devotion to God" and to "complete freedom from selfishness, from desire for revenge, from sensuality, and from covetousness."⁴⁷ Yes, it does have a very basic effect on the Christian as he is doing the things that pertain to this life, as he lives in the world. This vision of God, both as a present reality and as a future hope, is a vital part of the Christian life, and, indeed, a powerful force in it. Because Christians are thus waiting and hoping for the visible coming of their Lord, they are active in good works

⁴⁶Gerhard, Loci, "De vita aet...", section 75, quoted by Pieper, op. cit., p. 551.

⁴⁷Windisch, op. cit., p. 29.

(Matt. 24:45-51), they guard against carnal security (Matt. 24:36-39), they remain strangers and pilgrims here (1 Peter 2:11), they use this world without abusing it (1 Cor. 7:31), they are confident in the midst of death (1 Thess. 4:13-18), and, above all, they are active in preaching the good news of God also to others (Matt. 24:14, Mark 13:10).⁴⁸ All this is vitally involved in this hope in, and reality of, the visio Dei. It is significant that Jesus followed these Beatitudes with a command to be a salt and a light in this world.

Many have turned against the Church, not because it was salt, but because in their estimation it had become a narcotic; not because it destroyed the agents of decay, but because it taught men to accept injustice in the world and to live in hopes of the world to come--"pie in the sky by and by." For some, we are forced to admit, religion has become an opiate; but those who follow Christ's way of life are the salt of the earth--and the light of the world.⁴⁹

⁴⁸cf. Pieper, op. cit., p. 85.

⁴⁹Thompson, op. cit., p. 46.

CHAPTER IV

THE THOUGHT OF THE VISIO DEI IN 1 JOHN 3:2-3.

Introduction

The chain of teaching on the visio Dei which reaches back into the Old Testament for its roots does not break off when Jesus' work on this earth is done. Jesus came to establish the reign of God in the context of which this vision takes place. He has clearly taught and promised that vision, and His promise holds good now for all time, for all the children of God. The vitality of that promise does not wane and finally die out in the early church. It is restated in all its marvelous grandeur and purity by the Apostles of our Lord. After Christ has ascended into heaven they bring that promise to a new generation of believers.

The Apostle Paul stands squarely in line with Jesus on this teaching. While he firmly asserts the absolute invisibility of God to the human eye, declaring Him to be the invisible God, "Whom no man hath seen, nor can see,"¹ yet he too, reaffirming the teaching of Jesus, promises the believer in Him a vision of God. He, with the Christians to whom he is speaking and the Christians of all time, can say of this vision: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then

¹1 Tim. 6:16; see also 1 Tim. 1:17 and Col. 1:15.

face to face."² These two are not contradictory. Although God is invisible, yet He has made Himself visible in His Son, Jesus Christ, who, Paul declares, is the Image of God.³ Paul, too, realizes that this vision is an eschatological one,⁴ but, to be sure, eschatological in the sense that it has already taken a hold of the Christian man as he lives on this earth, so that he can see, though it is dimly. To him that vision is also no mere neutral experience; it is a dynamic and transforming vision, a power by which we "are changed into the same image from glory to glory."⁵ Paul, indeed, has much to say about this visio Dei, but it is perfectly in line with Jesus' teaching.

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, also carries on this teaching. He was present when Jesus spoke that memorable sixth Beatitude and thus promised the vision. He had often heard Jesus declare that the person who knows Jesus, also knows the Father, and "he that seeth me, seeth Him that sent me."⁶ These and many other similar sayings of our Lord must have had a pronounced influence on him. In his anxiousness to learn more and more about Jesus he probably with

² 1 Cor. 13:12; see also 2 Cor. 3:18.

³ Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4.

⁴ Col. 3:4; Phil. 3:21.

⁵ 2 Cor. 3:18; see also Phil. 3:21.

⁶ John 12:45.

reverent awe took in all these marvelous sayings of Jesus and pondered on their tremendous glory and on their deep mystery. At any rate there is an extremely close connection between the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:8 and the promise that John records in 1 John 3:2-3. The thought is almost identical, so that both ought to be looked at in the light of the other.

The identity of John's thought to that of Jesus is valuable for two reasons as we examine the teaching of the visio Dei. First, it is in the fullest sense the teaching of Jesus that John is proclaiming. And it is secondly valuable because John does stress more clearly many aspects of this teaching of Jesus; he presents it from a slightly different angle. His stress on the ethical implications of this vision as based squarely on hope on Jesus is clear and distinct. His distinction between the now and the not yet of the Christian life is brought out in this connection, and is worth noting. We shall therefore examine as thoroughly as possible in the limits of this thesis what John has to say in his first epistle, chapter three, verses two and three, about the vision of God.

A Survey on 1 John 3:2-3

In this total concept of the visio Dei there is a "now," as well as a "not yet." If we are to remain faithful to the Christian teaching, we must stress both without neglecting

either. Omitting or subduing the one involves a misunderstanding of both. The concept of a present state of blessedness without any future hope is empty. Likewise, such a future state which does not reach down into the present is utterly meaningless to people as they live their lives here in this world. Hence, as we view this passage from St. John, we must give both the present and the future aspect of this visio Dei their proper stress.

John himself feels obligated to do this in the passage we have before us. To be sure, he has much to say about its future aspect; but he cannot help but bring its meaning forcefully down to the present time. As he addresses the Christian recipients of his epistle, he declares: "Beloved, we are God's children now." Although the future will bring the complete unfolding of that state which we have now, at this present time, although its full manifestation is still hindered by the earthly circumstances in which we are placed, yet we are now really and presently all that the title "children of God" implies, no less. "The high privilege of sonship is not a mere possibility or prospect, but a present reality."⁷ Right now we, as true Christian believers, are in that intimate relationship with God that the Scriptures try to express in the term "sonship."

⁷George B. Stevens, The Johannine Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), p. 254.

Again, by his declaration that believers are now the children of God, John says they have been transported from the old aeon of darkness and blindness into the full context of the Kingdom of God. They are now those who possess the promises of the Beatitudes.⁸ Once the present reality of being children of God has been granted, it is an unfair procedure to push the present reality of the vision of God into the vague future. John himself speaks in terms which imply such a present vision, if it is at all to be understood properly. Time and again John notes that Jesus promises that "he that seeth me, seeth him that sent me."⁹ Very simply that means that the person who has seen Jesus, has seen the Father. But such a vision is not the work of physical eyes alone. Many of the people of Jesus' time saw Him with their physical eyes, but can we therefore conclude that all that saw Him merely in that way, saw God? Not at all. To the unbelief of the Jews, Pharisees, and even of His own disciples Jesus had to declare: "Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also."¹⁰ So it is that when simple vision is accompanied by faith, it leads to vision in a deeper and truer sense, according to John. It is not only vision accompanied

⁸Matt. 5:9.

⁹John 12:45; also John 14:8-9, 7.

¹⁰John 8:19.

by faith, but a vision and faith which are both part of the same thing.

Such faith-vision is not something that man does, similar to when we see a physical object, when we do the seeing. It is indeed this, but it is more than this; this faith-vision is primarily an act of God; it is confronting Jesus under the working of the Holy Spirit, which is fulfilled in coming to faith; it is a submitting of oneself in faith to the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ.¹¹ Dodd's summary of John's concept of this vision of God seems to be very clear.

Faith, then, is a form of vision. When Christ was on earth, to have faith was to "see His glory"--to apprehend and acknowledge the deity through the veil of humanity. Now that He is no longer visible to the bodily eye, faith remains the capacity for seeing His glory. This conception is vital to the evangelist's whole conception of the incarnation.¹²

Dodd here, of course, stresses the faith aspect of this faith-vision; and the relationship of the two are expressed well here. But the vision aspect also deserves some attention. For this vision, we must remember, is spoken of as a revelation of God. By faith we do see Christ's glory, and He has promised us: "and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to

¹¹Cf. Wilhelm Michaelis, ὄραω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), V, 363.

¹²C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: The University Press, 1954), p. 186.

him."¹³ Seeing does take place in more than a vague, nebulous sense; it is present and it is real. Michaelis remarks that John probably chose these verbs of seeing because in that way he could stress with their help the very personal, existential character of confronting Jesus.¹⁴

But while sonship of God is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a present reality, it is at the same time characterized by the expression "not yet," *οὐκ ἔτι*. That which we now have is not yet apparent. There is still something in this present earthly life that keeps it hidden, and that which hides it is sin. St. Paul also speaks of the hidden character of the Christian's life. He states that a Christian's life is hidden with Christ, but it is not hidden forever. It will be revealed when Christ appears in His glory.¹⁵ And because this life as a totality is hidden, the vision of God is also dimmed. Seeing God is indeed a present reality, but in this life its reality is hampered from coming to the fore, the vision that it involves is blurred. While this vision is there by and in faith, it is still not yet fully apparent because of sin. The faith of believers has its weaknesses; it must constantly be helped and increased

¹³John 14:21.

¹⁴cf. Michaelis, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹⁵Col. 3:1-4.

by God.¹⁶ So it is also with the vision of God; it too is weak; it too is hidden. That is why John can say of it that it is not yet fully apparent.

When John states that what we are to be as the children of God is not apparent yet, he is pointing into the future to a newer state of existence. Its "not yet" character tells us that it is something about which we must be content to remain in ignorance at present.¹⁷ It is apparently nothing different from what we are now already as the children of God, for then we will be that more completely.¹⁸ The "eternal life" which we are to have then is, according to John, primarily a fulfillment of our destiny as the children of God; it is "the attainment of the true goal of man's being in fellowship with God."¹⁹ The fulfillment and perfection of that fellowship will come in the future. So also will come the fulfillment and perfection of this vision. It too will be involved in the perfection that is to come in the future life. It reaches its climax and fulfillment in the perfect vision of God in eternal glory.

¹⁶Matt. 17:20; Mk. 9:24.

¹⁷C. H. Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, XVI in the Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1946), p. 70.

¹⁸Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), p. 97.

¹⁹Stevens, op. cit., p. 323.

Now once John has stated the two sides of this wonderful life in intimate communion with God, the "now" and the "not yet," his thoughts turn toward the fulfillment of this "not yet." But this fulfillment is significantly tied up with the phrase $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu \varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\delta\eta$. This phrase poses an exegetical problem. We must ask: what is the subject of the $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu \varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\delta\eta$? One possibility is that we draw the subject from what immediately precedes and use "what we shall be" as its subject. Schnackenburg²⁰ gives a good summary of the arguments that might be used in favor of this interpretation: (1) The more natural grammatical connection is to the preceding $\omicron\upsilon\pi\omega \epsilon\varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\delta\eta$. The $\omicron\upsilon\pi\omega$ seems to create a tension which $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu$ ("when") releases. (2) It seems rather difficult to supply a new nominative different from that of the verb in the previous sentence. (3) The $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu$ would otherwise refer to Christ, whereas in the following verse, 3:3, $\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ is used of Him. This interpretation would then indicate a translation something like this: "We know that, when our future state is made manifest, we, who are the children of God, shall be found like our Father."²¹

The other alternative is that we take "Christ" as the subject of the $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu \varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\delta\eta$. The points which favor this

²⁰Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, Die Johannesbriefe, in Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, c.1953), XIII, 3, p. 150.

²¹A. Plummer, The Epistles of St. John (Cambridge: The University Press, 1954), p. 121.

interpretation are as follows: (1) The $\varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\lambda\eta$ is used of Christ in 2:28. (2) The general sense of the passage indicates this. Throughout the passage the writer's thoughts are turned to the revelation of Christ in His glory at the Parousia. (3) John uses $\varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega$ a total of eighteen times. Of these twelve apparently have Christ as their subject, though most of them do refer to His manifestation in the flesh. (4) This may have been a favorite theme on which the readers had often heard John meditate: $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\lambda\eta$.

Brooke's comment on this last point seems pertinent.

It must also be remembered that the language of soliloquy and meditation has to some extent its own rules. To one pondering over the future glory of the Son of God, in the light of the present revelation of the Risen Lord, which suggests so much more than it actually reveals, the words $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \varphi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\omega\lambda\eta$ could probably have but one meaning.²²

Although either of these interpretations is possible Scripturally and exegetically, the latter one seems to be better and will be the one used in this thesis. The same thought is expressed in Col. 3:4 where St. Paul says that when Christ appears, is manifested in glory, then you will also be made manifest in glory. This appearance would then have reference to Christ's return to judge the world on the Last Day. This thought gains more significance as it is connected later in this same verse with the Christian's vision

²²A. E. Brooke, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), XLIII, 82.

of God. Already here, then, we would have the first clue to indicate that the glorious vision of God is one that is mediated through Christ; it comes with Christ's appearance before our eyes as He comes with all His holy angels to judge the world in righteousness. The Christian sees God, the full Godhead, in all glory, honor, and majesty as he fully and perfectly sees Christ coming, in Whom indeed does dwell the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

This then leads over to a description of the believers in this state of eternal bliss, as they enjoy the full vision of God in Christ. John can give no more glorious description than this that "we shall be like Him." Paul, incidentally, has a similar thought when he declares that God decreed of old that those whom He predestined should share the likeness of His Son.²³ This declaration that we will be like Him is not an equivalent to Satan's temptation: "Ye shall be like gods." It is nothing more--but also nothing less--than all that sonship to God implies. "Man darf die Übersetzung 'Gott gleich sein' auch deswegen nicht fordern, weil schon in der Gotteskindschaft die Ähnlichkeit mit Gott liege."²⁴ This likeness is then the sonship in its full consummated perfection. It is also indeed a glorious one, for "this likeness is the likeness of the creature

²³Rom. 8:29.

²⁴Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 151.

reflecting the glory of the Creator."²⁵ It is a likeness of full communion with God, and hence involves God's revealing Himself fully to His sons. This likeness to God in Christ is then one which involves the full vision of God in Jesus Christ. The two are inseparably connected in the statement: "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

When John speaks here of that final and full vision of God, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is," he does not make it too clear whether this likeness to God is a necessary condition to or an actual consequence of this seeing God. If the former is the case, then the state of "being like God" is the cause or that which enables the Christian to see God.²⁶ If the latter is what John is trying to say here, then the vision of God is that which makes the Christian like Him on that Last Day.²⁷ Both thoughts are Scriptural. Neither one is favored particularly in the thinking of John. In either case the central truth remains the same: the confidence of the believer is that he will see the full revelation of the glory of God in Christ, and therefore, when that vision comes, he will be like Him. Nevertheless, the second interpretation still does have a clearer Scriptural backing. Paul states: "But we all, with

²⁵Westcott, op. cit., p. 98.

²⁶cf. Schmackenburg, op. cit., p. 153.

²⁷cf. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1933), VI, 221.

unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory."²⁸ The transforming power of this vision of Christ brings to a consummation the glorious process begun at the new birth. As in this life the transforming power of faith-vision brings us closer to God--for we have seen that faith and vision cannot be so easily separated in Johannine thought--so this final great vision will bring us the rest of the way, into perfect likeness with God.

It is not very clear whether the ἀὐτόν in this verse refers to the Father or to the Son, though the latter is more natural in the context.²⁹ And it may be doubted whether one could say of the Father that He will be seen "as He is." But in the final analysis it makes little difference, because in Johannine thought to see the Son is to see the Father, and the Son is the only One Who reveals the Father.³⁰

As we examine this visio Dei in John and center our attention on this passage in 1 John 3:2, we must not neglect other passages in this very epistle which state that God cannot be seen. Such passages as 1 John 4:12 and 20, in denying that God has been or can be seen, are rather con-

²⁸2 Cor. 3:18.

²⁹Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, p. 70.

³⁰John 12:45 and 16:9; also John 1:18.

cerned with establishing the actual invisibility of God, and are not thinking primarily of the "Revealer-function" of Jesus as it is stated in John 1:18.³¹ John's opponents, or at least the currents of thought that he is trying to counter-balance, claim to be able to get a vision of God, actually to see God. His concept of seeing God is far different from that of the mysteries, of the Hellenistic systems of coming to God, and far different from that of Hellenistic Gnosis. Yes, his whole theology is different from theirs. Hence he cannot but absolutely deny such a vision of God as they or any man-made system might claim. He must tell them that in their manner of thinking God cannot be seen. "Johannes kennt keine mystische Gottesschau, in die man versinkt, so dasz das Wort Gottes seine Bedeutung verliere, und der Mensch nicht mehr zu glauben brauchte."³²

But, in spite of these opponents or this way of thinking, John does still want to remind his beloved Christians of the proclamation of Jesus in Matthew 5:8. It is a special, uniquely Christian vision, and he must bring this wonderful promise to them. In his proclamation John trusts to such passages as 1 John 4:12 and similar ones that this unique teaching of the vision of God will not be misunder-

³¹Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 366.

³²Friedrich Blüchsel, Johannes und der hellenistische Synkretismus (Gütersloh: Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1928), p. 79.

stood. We ought to bear in mind that the very reluctance with which only a few places speak of "seeing God" still clearly severs this New Testament concept from the Mystery-piety and Gnosis in this connection also.³³

This visio Dei is then, in its fulness, a promise that is reserved for the Last Day. The Day that brings the consummation of the ages will also bring with it the consummation of this beatific vision. The Second Visible Coming of Jesus ushers in this age of fulfillment for each and every one unto whom the first-fruits of faith have been given in this life. They have vision now, but it is so fogged and blurred that we might almost call it blindness in comparison. We must marvel now at the magnificence of God as He reveals Himself to our narrow vision in and through His Word. How much more will we not be able to marvel when that vision is infinitely full and glorious on that Day of Days!

Both then and now, it is a vision of God revealed to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ is and remains the only One in and through Whom God is seen.³⁴ But two things must be said about this eschatological vision. First of all, that eschatological seeing--as everything that is eschatological--will be totaliter aliter from everything that is

³³cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 368.

³⁴See a similar thought in Paul: 2 Cor. 4:4 and Col. 1:15, where Jesus is described as the Image of God.

now possible. And secondly, that on that blessed Day of the full vision of God, God's inaccessibility and the barriers which exist between God and men do not break down.³⁵ Not even heaven will erase the distinction that exists between the Creator and the creature. God will still be the "invisible God" and must still then be seen through Christ.

While it is indeed an immeasurably great blessing, yet this seeing God in the eschatological sense is not to be exalted over all the other promises for the Last Day. This visio Dei is only one aspect of our total communion with God. It is no more--but also no less--than being children of God or belonging to God's Kingdom.³⁶

The possession of such a glorious hope as has just been mentioned in verse two, now in verse three is the strongest incentive to absolute purity. Here it is that the ethics of the sixth Beatitude, which demands of the children of God a shadowless purity shown as the reflection of a pure and simple heart, is developed further. John now wants to bring home that very point, that childship to God, the hope of the full visio Dei involves the hope of increasing likeness to Him. "Purity is the necessary result of hope."³⁷ The argument here, according to Dodd, goes back to the theme of

³⁵cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 366.

³⁶Note the parallel promises in Matt. 5:8-10.

³⁷Brooke, op. cit., p. 83.

1 John 1:5-2:11. There we are told that in Him there is no darkness; and that means no sin. God is all light, all goodness; and the Son Who reveals the Father reveals His sinless perfection. Consequently, anyone who remains in Him does not sin; and, conversely, anyone who sins has neither seen nor known Him.³⁸ Because a Christian is already a child of God, that by no means gives him reason to sit back and take it easy. The hope of the Christian is incompatible with moral indifference. On the contrary, it gives him the reason and the power to grow toward absolute purity. And "the standard is nothing less than the perfected human life of the glorified Christ."³⁹ Such a vision of God and such a hope does put power into the life of the child of God. The dynamic of Paul's ethics, which grew out of already possessing this salvation--i.e., "Be what you are!"--shows itself here in Johannine theology.⁴⁰

John's stress on the word "everyone" emphasizes the all-inclusiveness of this ethics. With this all-inclusive term, $\pi\alpha\varsigma$, John is apparently trying to counteract the claims which some party or another makes for itself. They are very likely men who regarded themselves exempt from this duty to strive to keep the common law and to purify them-

³⁸ Cf. Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, p. 72.

³⁹ Brooke, op. cit., p. 83.

⁴⁰ Cf. Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 154.

selves.⁴¹ "No one, not even the 'Gnostic,' is raised by sonship to God to a state above moral obligations."⁴²

This hope for a full vision of God is a hope resting squarely on Christ, ἐπ' αὐτῷ. Right along with the presence of this hope, involved in the present vision of God in Christ, though it may be dim and somewhat blurred, there takes place this purifying process. The visio Dei of the consummation must of inner necessity result in likeness to God, being conformed completely to His Image. Actually that is what is taking place already in this life. The present, dim vision of God also brings with it an inner necessity for purifying the believer. Faith, or faith-vision as we may chose to call it here, in Christ is a power for purity. It makes possible the process of becoming more like unto Christ, the One on Whom this hope rests, the One Who is the Image of God, the very Revealer of God, κατὰ τὸν ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστίν. "That grace which the Christian has to seek diligently is the inherent attribute of Christ."⁴³

As this vision is primarily an act of God revealing Himself, and only secondarily do we do the seeing, so also is this cleansing primarily an act of God. While man is indeed active in this cleansing, while he purifies himself,

⁴¹Cf. Westcott, op. cit., p. 100.

⁴²Brooke, op. cit., p. 83.

⁴³Plummer, op. cit., p. 123.

while he does strive for perfection, yet this "purifying oneself" is not primarily an act of man, but can only take place as a result of the incomprehensibly great and gracious act of God in verse one of this chapter: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God."⁴⁴ God accomplishes this cleansing in a person only as the believer continually resorts to the cleansing blood of Jesus mentioned in chapter one, verse seven. There God, acting through the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin, all that hampers the fuller vision, all that then keeps us from rising to greater purity.

When a Christian thus purifies himself, this indeed does involve what we might call outward purity. The word *ἀγνός* is used in this sense. It is used primarily of ceremonial purification. "Those who appeared before God at the Jewish feasts were required first to purify themselves from all Levitical and ceremonial uncleanness."⁴⁵ Westcott expresses what this means in terms of the Christian when he says that by the practice of this purity he "disciplines himself that he may move more surely among the defilements of the world."⁴⁶ Its applications to the concrete defile-

⁴⁴Cf. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁴⁵Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 84; see also Ex. 19:10f; Num. 8:21; Josh. 3:5; John 11:55; and Acts 21:24, 26.

⁴⁶Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

ments which a Christian meets daily are numerous.

Although the idea of outward purity is present in this connection, yet it seems that the dominant idea is that of inward purity. It is indeed the inward which effects the outward purity.⁴⁷ In James 4:8 this verb, *ἀγνίζω*, is used of the heart; in 1 Peter 1:22 it is used of the soul; and in this passage, 1 John 3:3, it is used of the self. It seems to go back to the thought of Jesus that impurity of the inside of a cup makes it impure, that out of the heart proceed the outward acts of sin. It seems to hark back to the expression of Jesus that the pure in heart shall see God. Such purity which the vision brings is primarily inward, it permeates the whole self and will also come to the fore in the Christian's outward life.

Conclusion

In general then, John continues the thought of Jesus in the Beatitudes. Both teachings present us with the same picture, though John does lay quite a bit more stress on the direct ethical implications of this vision for the practical daily life of the Christians. Jesus, of course, also teaches this, but He does not seem to make as much of an effort to connect the two as clearly and concisely as John now does. The reason for this is probably to be found in

⁴⁷Cf. Plummer, op. cit., p. 122.

the fact that John is confronting a different situation, a situation in which this needs to be stressed.

CHAPTER V

SOME EARLY NON-CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ON THE VISIO DEI

Introduction

The teaching of the visio Dei was not something that remained peculiar to Christianity, nor, for that matter, was it a unique teaching of the Christian religion in the first place. The idea that a person might be able to see God also runs through non-Christian religions and systems of thought.

We find it present in Greek thought. It plays an important part in the mysteries.¹ To Homer and his contemporaries it was apparently natural to be able to see their gods. Odysseus would very likely not have been too shocked if he had met Zeus or Hera personally in the market-place, or in his home.

But while Greek and similar systems of theology are fascinating, we want to examine briefly some that were a bit more connected and involved with Christianity, and note their stress or lack of stress on the visio Dei. These will not necessarily be contemporary with New Testament times, nor is it the purpose of this examination to reveal their influence on, or their being influenced by the Christian

¹Cf. Wilhelm Michaelis, ὄρα in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954), V, 322.

teaching. The purpose of this examination is merely to give the reader an idea of the various strains of thought that were rampant in the people to whom the Christian teaching of the visio Dei was taught. Perhaps the teachings of some of these non-Christian peoples or groups were a determining factor in influencing Jesus or John or Paul to put much more stress on one aspect of the "vision of God" than on the other. Perhaps these false teachings provide the reason why John stresses time and again that "no man hath seen God at any time," while only rarely mentioning the positive visio Dei as taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes. There are good reasons for thinking so, but no positive proof. At any rate, we present them here as an almost inherent part of the thinking current in the world to which the Christian doctrine was preached.

Rabbinical Writings

Because of their strong leaning on the Old Testament Scriptures, the Rabbinical writings do not show any major departure from the Biblical teaching of the visio Dei. In fact, some of the comments which these Rabbis made throw some light upon the Old Testament teaching for us, light which helps us to see along what lines the Old Testament man was thinking when he heard or thought about the vision of God.

First of all, as in both the Old and New Testaments,

there is a great reluctance to speak of this vision--if not a deliberate avoidance.² They too seem to sense the great and complete mystery of the whole matter. And while they undoubtedly believe in it, they still approach it with a deep reverence. On the one hand, they are convinced that during this life no man can see God, because God is invisible.³ They take very seriously the complete distinctness of the divine nature of that One who created all things. He is not only invisible and incomprehensible to the fleshly nature of man, but they go so far logically along this line as to declare that not even the angels which are with God can see Him.⁴ Their distinction which makes God invisible is one between creature and Creator. Incidentally, such a distinction would support the concept that not even after death, when man is, so to speak, "spiritualized," will man be able to see God except by a special revealing act of God. Furthermore, the Rabbis continue the thought that seeing God means death, not only for a man, but also for groups of men, for a tribe. They say that Levi disappeared as a tribe because he saw the face of God.⁵ In summary, Jesus,

² Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 339.

³ Cf. Ibid., pp. 339-40.

⁴ Cf. Ibid., p. 340

⁵ Cf. Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrash (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), I, 214.

son of Sirach, says that the vision of God is impossible at all events in this life.⁶

Then it is also to be noted that, according to the Rabbis, this vision of God is an eschatological one;⁷ their hope in it is a hope directed toward the great Last Day, in the time and the life that is to come to them after their death. Some speculated that when this vision would come at the time of death, it would come in all its glory; there would be no gradual unveiling.⁸ Others did not agree on this point; they thought that God would not reveal His full majesty in one dazzling vision, but would unveil Himself to their eyes gradually.⁹ At times, however, this beatific vision is referred to the days of the Messiah;¹⁰ but to their mind it seems that the days of the Messiah were equivalent to the Last Great Day of the Lord, the Day of God's Deliverance. So, on the whole, we must admit with Michaelis: "Erst recht wird die Seligkeit nach der Auferstehung der Toten in der kommenden Welt als ein Schauen Gottes gefasst."¹¹

⁶Ecclesiasticus 43:31.

⁷Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., pp. 339-40.

⁸Cf. Strack--Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 207.

⁹Cf. Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁰Cf. Kenneth Escott Kirk, The Vision of God (London: Longmans, Green, 1931), p. 19.

¹¹Michaelis, op. cit., p. 339.

Finally, when we examine the ethics which the Rabbis connected with this vision, we find the first real break with the Christian concept of the visio Dei. This Shekinah is seen by the righteous, for "he whose stony heart has become flesh is worthy to look upon the face of the Shekinah."¹² Here enters in the idea of worth or merit on the part of the one who is to see this vision. Rabbinic theology promises that the vision comes with the giving of alms, wearing of fringes of the orthodox Jewish gown, and these things make the believer worthy. By these various details to which a promise was attached, they took this blessed vision out of the realm of pure grace and made a work-righteousness out of it.¹³ Another way in which this vision was to be attained was by study and observation of the Law, a scrupulously careful examination and comparison of the sacred text.¹⁴ At times the vision was thought of as coming in a corporate act; the Rabbis preferred that at least two study the Law together.¹⁵ Essentially then the Rabbinic concept of the visio Dei differed from that of the Christian in that the former was something merited, the

¹²Kirk, op. cit., p. 20.

¹³Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 340.

¹⁴Kirk, op. cit., p. 21. He here notes the calm and methodical attitude of the Rabbis in attaining to the vision, contrasting it to the apocalyptists who thought to attain to it by supernatural manifestation in the ecstasy of a trance.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 22.

latter conceives of it as a pure act of God's grace.

Apocalyptic Views of the Visio Dei

In dealing with the apocalyptists we come upon another branch of Jewish thought. While they are a definite part of the stream of Jewish thinking, they are distinguished from the main stream by the extreme vividness with which they viewed the coming of the Messiah. In the midst of those troubled times they expected the Last Great Day of the Lord to come momentarily. And the excitement of the times made itself felt in the zeal and fervor with which they looked for that blessed vision of God. Their approach to the prospect of the vision was more one of enthusiasm and ecstasy than was that of the more conservative Rabbis.

In a way similar to the Rabbinic teaching, the apocalyptists also taught that the way to the vision of God is hedged about with many prescriptions which the man of God must fulfill; the goal of the vision is reached through such striving. Righteousness is a prerequisite for it. The way to it is a narrow, strict way through which one must pass.¹⁶ For them it did not come abruptly, but they prefaced it with the soul's flight through several inferior heavens, at times three, and also later seven. Then comes the blessed vision

¹⁶cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 339; also Kirk, op. cit., pp. 18-19; also 2 Esra 6:32, and Enoch 44 to 46 (especially 45:3).

of Enoch 22:1: "I saw the appearance of the Lord's face."¹⁷

This seeing of God is very likely eschatological; it is referred to the time when all men must stand before the judgment throne of God. The sinner must appear before Him as a stage of his punishment;¹⁸ and the righteous will there see the glory and the face of God.¹⁹ At times reference is made to seeing the Salvation of God, but not God Himself;²⁰ at other times seeing the $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ of God is an equivalent to Israel's experience of the grace of God.²¹

As we have just noted above, here with the apocalyp-
tists, the thought is added that the wicked can also come to this vision of God. They too must pass through several stages before that vision is attained. But as their life was one of unrighteousness, so these stages are stages of punishment, and the great climax to their punishment is their vision of God. For "what could be more terrible than that the wicked behold the face of the Most High?"²² For the unrighteous the vision of God is as much a punishment as

¹⁷Cf. Kirk, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁸₄ Esra 7:87.

¹⁹₄ Esra 7:91 and 98.

²⁰₄ Esra 6:25; 9:8.

²¹See Psalms of Solomon 17:31; and Michaelis, op. cit., p. 339.

²²Kirk, op. cit., p. 17; see also Jub. 1:28.

that same vision is a blessing to the righteous. That seems to be the reason why the apocalyptists at times deny that any but the righteous do get to see God at the consummation of time:²³ it is for the wicked not that vision of blessed praise, but of judgment.

Philo of Alexandria

Philo was a Jew by birth and religion, but was reared in a very Hellenistic world. He was profoundly influenced by Greek thought--particularly by Platonism--and by Greek culture in general, and became at home in it. But, after all, he was still a loyal Jew, true to his religion. It was his desire and aim, by his writings, to commend the Jewish faith to the Hellenistic world in terms which they could understand. As a result of, and in the process of, this attempt, he could not help but be influenced by the Hellenistic thought that he knew so well. The result of his and similar attempts was what we would call "Hellenistic Judaism." In him then we will observe the teaching of the visio Dei as it is articulated in a system of thought that is not strictly Jewish in character.

Philo did have much to say about the possibility of seeing God. He says in some places that "physical sight cannot attain to the vision. Only the eye of the soul can

²³See Michaelis, op. cit., p. 339.

see God."²⁴ It is then through the eyes of faith that the believer comes into the presence of the Almighty and Invisible God. Here he seems to stay close to the Scriptural teaching, for while he does often appear to speak unreservedly about a real seeing of God, at the same time he again and again proclaims the fundamental invisibility and incomprehensibility of God.²⁵

The vision comes about in this way. "God breathed into man a spark of divinity. That, in its striving, penetrates to grasp the incomprehensible nature of God if it can."²⁶ This "spark of divinity" then gives man a bit of a start and a push toward seeking God on the analogy that like attracts to like; the divineness in man is automatically attracted to the divine God. This spark of attraction then expresses itself in various people in various ways, through practices of the Essenes and Therapeutae, through meditation on ancient and Orgyian doctrines, or through philosophy.²⁷ The vision is then attained through a combination of self-mortification and meditation. It is first of all attained by a very rigorous practice of virtue, a work-righteousness; but this work-righteousness is carried to an extreme in that

²⁴ Kirk, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

²⁵ See Michaelis, op. cit., p. 337.

²⁶ Kirk, op. cit., p. 44.

²⁷ See various quotations in Kirk, op. cit., pp. 40-43.

it is coupled "with the practice of letting the soul escape the bondage of the body by self-mortification."²⁸ Next, that pure soul proceeds to philosophy, a meditation on God and His works. But the best that such a philosophy can do is to initiate into the "lower mysteries."²⁹ During this mental process in which the aspirant to the vision is still learning, or as Kittel puts it, "hears," this hearing is still subject to erring and deception.³⁰ Then finally we come to see wisdom, a seeing which is not subject to error, and this wisdom takes the place of what we have learned. At this point we are near to the vision of God.³¹

When the believer comes to that vision, it is generally in the nature of ecstasy. Philo describes it as being similar to that of the Bacchae or Korybantes of paganism, or like the ecstasies of the Old Testament prophets.³²

On the whole it is extremely difficult to speak at all dogmatically about Philo's concept of the visio Dei, for at times he talks as if simple purity of heart were enough of a prerequisite, and at other times he is uncertain whether men

²⁸Kirk, op. cit., p. 41.

²⁹cf. Ibid., p. 42.

³⁰cf. Gerhard Kittel, ἀκρόω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, begründet von Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933), I, 217.

³¹cf. Kirk, op. cit., p. 43.

³²cf. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

will attain the vision. Although the above overview is somewhat tenuous, it will serve as a guide to his thinking on this subject. It points up some of the consistencies with other Jewish thought as well as some influences brought to bear on him by the culture in which he was nourished.

Gnosticism as Found in the Hermetic Corpus

The tendency which we have already noted in the works of Philo continues later under the general name of Gnosticism. More than before, the people of that age saw other religions beyond their own national religion, and very often saw some merit in these other systems of theology. Taking this wider view of various religious ideas, they apparently felt that Christianity was much too narrow for them. So Gnosticism "sought to elevate Christianity to the position of the universal religion, by combining in it all the tendencies and energies of the age, and thus adapting it to the comprehension of all and satisfying the needs of all."³³

Gnosticism too has a lot to say about the visio Dei. It holds that as a man approaches closer to God, this changes him, and, as a result of this change, he can see God. When man, through this system, finally attains to full knowledge, or $\gamma\rho\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$, he has indeed the vision of God.

³³Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrines, translated by Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1952), I, 94.

For to the Gnostic these two are equated. "Diese substantielle Verwandlung des Menschen wird durch die Gnosis herbeigeführt: die γνώσις ermöglicht die Νέα, die Schau Gottes, ja sie ist selbst Schau Gottes."³⁴ With these general thoughts in mind, we shall see first of all what the Hermetic Corpus has to say about this vision.

The Hermetic Corpus, like the Christian writings on this subject, starts out with the basic premise that God is invisible to the physical eyes of man. They hold that He is ἀόρατος and ἀφανής.³⁵ And, hence, in several places, they hold that the possibility of such a vision cannot come until after death. "Occasional passages of a pessimistic kind suggest that the vision of God is not possible in this life, even to such reborn souls."³⁶ But such passages by no means give the whole story. Other passages assert definitely that this vision is completely open to the Gnostic already now with the eyes of the mind.³⁷ Though there is, on the whole, a little reluctance to speak about it as an

³⁴Michaelis, op. cit., p. 323.

³⁵Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 323; also Corp. Herm., VII, 2a, in Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, I, edited and translated by Walter Scott (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924).

³⁶Kirk, op. cit., p. 50.

³⁷Cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 323; also Corp. Herm., V, 2; XII, 20b.

absolute and dogmatic fact, the teaching is unmistakably there, and, in fact, runs through the whole Hermetic Corpus.

In progressing toward that knowledge or vision of God, the first step is knowledge of self.³⁸ In that process one must free himself from this world as it is characterized by sense perceptions; it is a transfer from this physical world --though not in body--to a world or system of being which is entirely independent of this world, into a subjection to Mind, *νοῦς*.³⁹ This transfer is usually an ecstatic experience, though there might be cases where this ecstasy is not present; the ecstasy is not the absolute test of the vision.⁴⁰ The Hermeticists retain purity of heart and moral perfection as essential prerequisites for seeing God; the theory is in evidence throughout the Corpus. They made the claim that like can only be seen by like, and for that reason they must become equal with God.⁴¹ But if the criticisms of Irenaeus hold good against them, their system broke down before they carried out any of this moral perfectionism. Because of their Gnosis they thought themselves above standards of morality.⁴²

³⁸Corp. Herm., I, 19, 21.

³⁹cf. Michaelis, op. cit., p. 323.

⁴⁰Corp. Herm., X, 4b-6.

⁴¹Ibid., XI, 20b.

⁴²See following survey on Irenaeus, Infra, pp. 72f.

In the process of striving for this vision, the aspirant seeks God in the supernatural phenomena of nature, in "dreams at night, and by signs in the daytime . . . by the flight of birds, by the inward parts of beasts, by inspiration, or by the whispering of an oak tree."⁴³ Or this search for God is also spoken of in terms similar to that used of baptism: "Dip yourself in this basin, if you can, recognizing for what purpose you have been made, and believing that you shall ascend to Him who sent the basin [filled with Mind] down."⁴⁴ It seems to be a spiritual or intellectual flight of the soul through systems and orders of knowledge by some mysterious means to break through to a super-intelligence. Such a superintelligence makes a person independent of this physical world and at the same time is the vision of God.

What the mysteries did for the eye, the Hermetic tracts professed to do for the ear. By word of mouth, by exhortation, by instruction, rather than by ornate ceremonial or solemn theurgy, they proposed to bring men to the vision of God.⁴⁵

Gnosticism in Irenaeus

The Gnosticism against which Irenaeus wrote is not of a unique type; yet some of the observations that he makes

⁴³Corp. Herm., XII, 19.

⁴⁴Ibid., IV, 4.

⁴⁵Kirk, op. cit., p. 46.

are quite pertinent to our subject. As was usual, the Gnostics held that God was incapable of being seen,⁴⁶ but men could attain to perfect Gnosis and a full vision through their system of a superior knowledge. They claim that the "consummation will take place when all that is spiritual has been formed and perfected by Gnosis; and by this they mean spiritual men who have attained perfect knowledge of God and been initiated into these mysteries by Ahamoth."⁴⁷

Such as have attained to this Gnosis claim that they are spiritual, which, they claim, gives them independence from all moral standards. "They also maintain that they have attained to a height above all power, and that therefore they are free in every respect to act as they please."⁴⁸ And they took this self-imposed liberty and enjoyed it to the full. They were guilty of all kinds of open sins. After enumerating a full paragraph of their open sins, Irenaeus continues with this statement: "And committing many other abominations and impieties, they run us down . . . as utterly contemptible and ignorant persons, while they highly exalt themselves, and claim to be perfect, and the elect

⁴⁶ Irenaeus, "Against the Heresies," I, ii, 1, in The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885).

⁴⁷ Ibid., I, vi, 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid., I, xiii, 6.

seed."⁴⁹

In summary, they believed they were capable of coming to the visio Dei while in this life. And, inasmuch as many of them did claim this "vision," which they equated with Gnosis, they felt that they were above any standard of ethics.

Conclusion

The promises in both the words of Jesus and of John, that believers shall see God, were probably not spoken in direct opposition to any one system or theology. But they were spoken to a people whose thinking was by no means unaffected by one or more of such systems of theology or philosophy.

The systems we have looked over so far have been, to some extent, at least, representative of the type of thought whose influence was making itself felt among the people to whom Jesus and His "beloved disciple" addressed themselves. These systems might be arbitrarily divided as follows: Rabbinic and Apocalyptic literature were, on the whole, Jewish thought. The Gnosticism against which Irenaeus spoke and which the Hermetic Corpus teaches is more Hellenistic. And Philo is in a position of mediating between the two systems, taking some of the bad points of both.

⁴⁹Irenaeus, op. cit., I, vi, 3-4.

On that basis Jesus was most likely speaking to people influenced somewhat by a Rabbinic-Apocalyptic-Philo system of thought which stressed that man must make himself worthy to come before God and thus work his own way to that blessed vision of God. Perhaps that is why Jesus put a lot of stress on the fact that this vision is an act of God. He does it in the Beatitudes by surrounding that promise with other promises which are definitely acts of God through Jesus.⁵⁰ He again stresses a purely divine action when He says, in the words of the Gospel according to St. John, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."⁵¹

The people to whom John wrote his epistle were probably of a more Hellenistic background, influenced by the Philo-Gnostic way of thinking. These Hellenists put much stress on the intellect and attaining to the vision by means of the mind. Throughout his first epistle John is combating such bare knowledge which sneers at faith. On the other hand, these Gnostics played down the part that ethics plays in the Scriptural doctrine of the visio Dei. Very likely that is why John follows his promise of the vision of God with the words: "And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself

⁵⁰See the section on the Beatitudes, Supra, p. 20.

⁵¹John 1:18.

as He is pure."⁵²

The relationship between Jesus and John and these non-Christian systems of thought are not absolutely certain, but noticing the possibilities of these relationships is certainly helpful in understanding the Christian proclamation and its relation to other theologies and teachings.

⁵² John 3:3.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As was the case with the rest of the Christian teaching, so also this teaching of the visio Dei remained distinctly Christian in the midst of a syncretistic age. It was an age which fostered a tolerant and over-sympathetic attitude toward religions of all other kinds and creeds. That age produced Herodians, who were ready to compromise in matters of practice and religion in order to co-exist with their conquerors, men like Philo, and sects like those of the Gnostics. These groups were regarded as the true, forward-looking, progressive thinkers. Such groups were almost the "heroes of the day." In the face of such popular rivalry the teaching of the vision of God remained strictly faithful to Christ's teaching. It did not allow itself to be wooed over from Christ's side.

This Christian teaching of the visio Dei as it is found in Holy Scriptures is primarily a vision that is mediated through Christ. The Old Testament already took seriously the essential invisibility of God, for the blessed vision then too had to be an act of God's-grace. With the incarnation of Jesus that act of grace became concentrated in a person, in the person of the God-man. Now, in the New Testament age of fulfillment Jesus becomes the concrete Revealer

of God.

But this does not mean that we can spiritualize this vision completely. We cannot call it only faith. There is a seeing which does go on; hence, the term "faith-vision" might be used, because both faith and vision are actually a part of this concept of "vision." The visual aspect of this concept is brought out well in the Old Testament. There the prophets actually saw visions and Job could look forward with confidence to a very concrete vision of God in the life after death. The presence of this vision now in this life is also continued in the New Testament, for he who now sees Jesus in faith also sees the Father.

As the example of Job would indicate this vision is also eschatological; it is one which will be experienced in its fulness on the Last Day. In the New Testament 1 John 3:2 particularly stresses the eschatological aspect of this vision. Actually it is both present now and also not present yet. It shows that tension which exists between eschatology and realized eschatology.

Such a faith-vision involves the "seer" in an ethics. But this vision does more than involve the Christian; it is the very power which enables him to be what he is, to "purify himself, even as He is pure." John particularly brings out the important part that ethics does have in this vision in 1 John 3:3.

The words of St. John best sum up all that we can say

about this beatific vision.

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. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Primary Sources

Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, The. 2 vols. Edited in conjunction with many scholars by R. H. Charles. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913.

Bible, Holy. King James Version.

Bible, Holy. Revised Standard Version.

Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus. I. Edited and translated by Walter Scott. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924.

Irenaeus. "Against the Heresies," in The Anti-Nicene Fathers. I. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885.

B. Commentaries

Briggs, C. A., and E. G. Briggs. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms. Vol. XII, 1 in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906.

Brooke, A. E. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles. Vol. XLII in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928.

Dodd, C. H. The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. Cambridge: The University Press, 1954.

----- The Johannine Epistles. Vol. XVI in The Moffatt New Testament Commentary. New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1946.

Driver, Samuel Rolles. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy. Vol. V in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906.

- Driver, Samuel Rolles, and George Buchanan Gray. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job. Vol. XIV, 1 in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921.
- Gray, George Buchanan. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Numbers. Vol. IV in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.
- A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah. Vol. XV, 1 in The International Critical Commentary. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912.
- Interpreter's Bible, The. I, II, and IV. Editorial Board. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952.
- Plummer, A. The Epistles of St. John. Cambridge: The University Press, 1954.
- Robertson, Archibald Thomas. Word Pictures in the New Testament. VI. New York: Harper and Brothers, c.1933.
- Ross, Alexander. The Epistles of James and John. Vol. XVI in The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954.
- Schlatter, A. Der Evangelist Matthäus. Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1948.
- Schnackenburg, Rudolf. Die Johannesbriefe. Vol. XIII, 3 in Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament. Freiburg: Verlag Herder, c.1953.
- Strack, Hermann L., and Paul Billerbeck. Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrash. I. München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922.
- Thompson, Ernest Trice. The Sermon on the Mount and its Meaning for Today. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, c.1946.
- Weiser, Artur. Das Buch Hiob. Vol. XIII in Das Alte Testament Deutsch. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1951.
- Westcott, Brooke Foss. The Epistles of St. John. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955.

Windisch, Hans. The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount.
Translated by S. Machean Gilmour. Philadelphia: The
Westminster Press, c.1951.

C. Other Secondary Material

Bichsel, Friedrich. Johannes und der hellenistisches Syn-
kretismus. Gütersloh: Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1928.

Heinisch, Paul. Theology of the Old Testament. English
translation by William Heidt. Collegeville, Minn.: The
Liturgical Press, c.1950.

Kirk, Kenneth Escott. The Vision of God: the Christian Doc-
trine of the Summum Bonum. London: Longmans, Green,
1931.

Kittel, Gerhard. ἀκούω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum
Neuen Testament. Begründet von Gerhard Kittel. I.
Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1933.

Michaelis, Wilhelm. ὁράω in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum
Neuen Testament. Begründet von Gerhard Kittel. V.
Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1954.

Nygren, Anders. The Gospel of God. Translated by L. J.
Tinterud. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, c.1951.

Oehler, Gustav Friedrich. Theology of the Old Testament.
Revision of the translation in Clark's Foreign Theolog-
ical Library, with the additions of the second German
edition, an introduction, and notes by George E. Day.
New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1883.

Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics. Translated by Walter
W. F. Albrecht. III. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia
Publishing House, 1953.

Procksch, Otto. Theologie des Alten Testaments. Gütersloh:
C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1950.

Richardson, Alan. A Theological Word Book of the Bible.
New York: The Macmillan Company, c.1950.

Seeberg, Reinhold. Text-Book of the History of Doctrines.
Translated by Charles E. Hay. I. Grand Rapids, Mich.:
Baker Book House, 1952.

Stevens, George B. The Johannine Theology: A Study of the Doctrinal Contents of the Gospel and Epistles of the Apostle John. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895.