

(THIRD EDITION)

## 2. CAN G-D BE SEEN?

EXODUS 33:20-23

USUAL TRANSLATION (JPS 1917)

“And He (G-d) said:  
‘You cannot see My face,  
for a man shall not see Me and live.’ ”  
“And the L-rd said:  
‘Behold, there is a place by Me  
and you shall stand upon the rock.  
And it shall come to pass,  
while My glory passes by,  
that I will put you in a cleft (crack)  
of the rock, and will cover you  
with My hand until I have passed by.  
And I will take away My hand,  
and you shall see My back,  
but My face shall not be seen.’ ”

In EXODUS 33:20-23, G-d tells Moses that He will pass by him, but Moses can only see His back because a man can't see G-d's face or front and live. For thousands of years, people have been trying to understand why the Hebrew Bible says that G-d can't be seen, but in some quotes G-d is seen.

### VISIONS OF G-D

Most prophets saw G-d in visions and dreams,

and I think that they could do this because they were not really seeing G-d. I think they were actually seeing an image of G-d. The problem is that the Hebrew Bible does not always say that a prophet saw an image of G-d in a vision or a dream. Sometimes, it just says that a prophet saw G-d, and then it describes what the prophet saw.

For example, ISAIAH 6:1-5 says that Isaiah saw G-d in the Temple with his eyes. This sounds like the prophet saw G-d in reality, and not in a vision, but a prophet could see G-d with his eyes in a vision too.

For example, EZEKIEL 8:4 says that the prophet Ezekiel saw G-d in a vision, and then EZEKIEL 8:5 says that G-d told Ezekiel to turn his eyes to look in a certain direction, and Ezekiel turned his eyes that direction and looked, even though he was looking in a vision.

In EZEKIEL 40:2, G-d brought Ezekiel to the Temple in a vision, and in EZEKIEL 40:4, He says to Ezekiel to look with his eyes and to listen with his ears, even though this was taking place in a vision.

In GENESIS 31:10-12, Jacob tells about a dream he had while watching his father-in-law's flock where the angel of G-d spoke to him. GENESIS 31:10 says that Jacob lifted up his eyes and saw what the male goats looked like, and in GENESIS 31:12, the angel tells Jacob to lift up his eyes and see the male goats. Even though he sees them in a dream, he still lifts up his eyes to see them.

EZEKIEL 1:1 says that the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of G-d. Then, EZEKIEL 1:26-28 says that Ezekiel saw the likeness of a man sitting on a

throne with fire from the waist down, which was the likeness of the glory of G-d.

DANIEL 7:1 says that the prophet Daniel saw visions in dreams at night, and, in DANIEL 7:9, it says he saw an "Ancient One of Days"(G-d) who looked like a man with hair like pure (clean) wool sitting on a fiery throne, and supposedly a man comes to him to receive a kingdom.

This description is very similar to the description of G-d sitting on a fiery throne in EZEKIEL 1:26-28. The vision of DANIEL 7 is also interesting because it is the only vision that supposedly has G-d and the Messiah, the future king of Israel, seen together.

I think DANIEL 7 is translated wrong, and I discuss it in it's own chapter in another volume.

## EXODUS 33:20-23

EXODUS 33:20 says people can't see G-d's face and live, although Moses was allowed to see G-d's back, but not His face, in EXODUS 33:23.

## SEEING G-D "FACE TO FACE"

The Hebrew Bible says that G-d spoke to people of Israel "face to face" in DEUTERONOMY 5:4, but that does not have to mean they saw G-d's face. The phrase "face to face" could mean G-d is talking to a person in reality, outside of the person's mind, and not in a vision or a dream in a person's mind.

DEUTERONOMY 5:4 says G-d spoke to Israel

"face to face" (or "face against face" because it does not really say the word "to"), but DEUTERONOMY 4:12-15 says they saw no form or image, they only heard a voice. This shows that "face to face" does not mean they actually saw His face or any image.

EXODUS 33:11 says that G-d spoke to Moses "face to face", but in EXODUS 33:20 G-d said to Moses that he won't be able to see G-d's face, but only G-d's back, as G-d passes by him.

## WHY MOSES WAS A UNIQUE PROPHET

I think Moses was unique as a prophet because he could talk to G-d "face to face" and not just in visions and dreams. DEUTERONOMY 34:10-12 says: "And did not rise up a prophet again in Israel like Moses, who the L-rd knew him face to face, for all of the signs and wonders that the L-rd sent him to do in the land of Egypt for Pharaoh and for all of his servants and for all of his land, and for all of the strong hand and for all of the great terror that Moses did to (before) the eyes of all of Israel."

I think other people could not take hearing G-d speak, except in a vision or a dream. For example, when G-d gave the ten commandments to the people, He spoke to them "face to face" (DEUTERONOMY 5:4), but they could not take hearing Him speak, and they told Moses to talk to G-d for them because they were afraid that they were going to die. See EXODUS 20:15-18 and DEUTERONOMY 5:19-24 (which repeats the story).

EXODUS 25:21-22 and NUMBERS 7:89 describe how Moses would hear G-d's voice in the tent

of meeting when they were traveling in the wilderness.

## EYE TO EYE

NUMBERS 14:14 is usually translated "...face to face You, L-rd, are seen...", but the quote really says "eye against eye You, L-rd, are seen..." or "eye to eye, L-rd, You are seen..." Then it says that G-d's cloud and pillar of fire were with the people. Maybe this shows that they saw G-d because they saw the cloud and pillar of fire He traveled in. The same words are used in ISAIAH 52:8 which says that G-d will be seen "eye to eye" (eye against eye) returning to Zion.

Maybe seeing G-d "eye to eye" means they saw G-d in reality like "face to face" might mean, and not in a vision or dream.

## EXODUS 24:9-11

In EXODUS 24:1-2, G-d told Moses to come up to Him on the mountain with some other people and seventy elders, but only Moses would come close to Him. Later, EXODUS 24:12-18 says that G-d called Moses and his servant Joshua to come up to Him on the mountain and that a cloud covered the mountain and G-d's glory was like a fire on the top of it.

Before Moses and Joshua went up the mountain, EXODUS 24:9-11 says that Moses and some other people saw G-d, but it does not say if they saw him in a vision, a dream, or face to face. I think they saw Him in a vision because EXODUS 33:20

says that people can't see G-d and live. EXODUS 24:9-11 says they saw G-d, and they ate and drank, but they did not go up the mountain to where G-d's glory was.

EXODUS 24:10-11 also says that they saw G-d, and G-d did not stretch forth His hand to the nobles of the children of Israel. Some commentators say that this means that G-d did not punish them for looking at Him. Other commentators say that it means that G-d did not put His spirit on them like He did later in NUMBERS 11:16-17 and NUMBERS 11:24-26 when He made many elders become prophets to help Moses with the people.

For examples of quotes where G-d put His hand against people to punish them, see EXODUS 3:20, 1 SAMUEL 5:9, and 1 SAMUEL 7:13. In 1 SAMUEL 5:6 and EZEKIEL 13:9, the quotes say G-d put His hand "to" people to punish them.

For an example of G-d putting His hand "to" a prophet to make him run fast, see 1 KINGS 18:46.

For examples of quotes where G-d put His hand on a prophet to make him prophesy when he was awake, see 2 KINGS 3:15.

For examples of G-d putting His hand on a prophet to make him prophesy in a vision, see EZEKIEL 1:1-3, EZEKIEL 3:14, EZEKIEL 37:1, and EZEKIEL 40:1-2.

EZEKIEL 8:1-3 is similar to EXODUS 24:1-11 because Ezekiel the prophet was sitting with seventy elders when the hand of the L-rd fell on him and he saw visions of G-d. It doesn't say anything about the elders seeing anything too.

## SEEING G-D'S FACE OR PRESENCE

There are a few quotes in the Hebrew Bible that say that all of the males of Israel have to come to the Tabernacle or Temple three times a year to see G-d's face or presence. These quotes are usually translated as saying three times a year every male will appear before the L-rd, but really they say that three times a year, every male will come to see the face or presence of G-d, because the word פָּנֵי in Hebrew can mean "the front of something", "a surface", "a face", or "a presence."

For examples of quotes about seeing G-d's face or presence three times a year, see EXODUS 23:15, EXODUS 23:17, EXODUS 34:23, EXODUS 34:24, and DEUTERONOMY 16:16. For quotes about seeing G-d's face or presence at other times, see EXODUS 34:20, DEUTERONOMY 31:11, and ISAIAH 1:12.

ISAIAH 1:12 says "when you will come to see My face (My presence)..." or "when you will come for the seeing of My face (My presence)..."

Usually, ISAIAH 1:12 is translated as "when you will come to appear (to be seen) before Me..."

I think that they were not going to see G-d's face, but His presence three times a year. There are some quotes that say that G-d's presence or glory was in a cloud that filled up the Tabernacle or the Temple. For examples, see EXODUS 40:34-35 and 1 KINGS 8:10-11.

The Tabernacle was the tent that G-d or His presence was in when the people of Israel left Egypt and were traveling in the wilderness for forty years.

For examples of similar quotes about seeing

the faces of different people, see GENESIS 31:2, GENESIS 43:3, EXODUS 34:35, and 2 SAMUEL 3:13.

1 SAMUEL 1:22 is different because Samuel the prophet's mother says that he will be seen with G-d forever in the house of the L-rd, instead of saying he will see G-d forever in the house of the L-rd.

(This is an excerpt from the book "Hebrew Bible Quotes that Have Been Misunderstood for Thousands of Years, Third Edition, Volume 1, © 2021 by Kenneth Greifer.)