

Seeing and hearing in the Bible

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Always already

In the gospel of John, which is the most Greek of gospels, and the most far-reaching in its use of rhetorical devices, there is a surprising clash between “seeing” and “hearing,” Jesus being the paradigmatic seer whom one then hears out (the gospel begins with “in the beginning was the word”...). John 8.38 says: “what I have seen near my father, I say; as for you, you do what you’ve heard from the father” (ἃ ἐγὼ ἑώρακα παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ λαλῶ· καὶ ὑμεῖς οὖν ἃ ἠκούσατε παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ποιῆτε). Compare this verse to Luther’s “seeing and hearing” rhetoric.¹ For Luther, the ears are the quintessential Christian organ, because they require faith. The same mixed metaphors can be seen elsewhere in the Bible. John normally uses “hear” in these chapters 8-9. Jesus is presented here as having seen the word of truth, which means that Jesus had direct contact rather than being at one remote from the original revelation.²

Hans Jonas, in a paper on Heidegger and theology, makes important remarks on the use of these two metaphors.³ He begins his paper by showing how Philo of Alexandria gives pride of place to the Greek mode of thinking,⁴ for instance in the way he interprets the name given to Jacob, Israel, as a “God-seer.” Jacob’s seeing, argues Philo, gives him a more authentic relationship with God and his word, whereas

Ishmael—Jacob’s alter-ego in spite of the change of generation—is but a “God-hearer.”⁵

The Bible itself, such as we have it now, i.e. according to the order created in the post-exilic period,⁶ seems to incorporate a sustained reflection on those two modes of contemplation, without choosing one over the other, while progressively complicating their modalities. God appears to the biblical heroes in the full of day at the beginning of the stories of Adam, Noah, and Abraham, but soon only at night (Jacob) or even is barely present in Joseph’s dreams, before returning in the fullness of day for Moses, and becoming a “seeable word” for prophets and kings (vision and hearing), chronicles, etc....⁷

⁵The texts quoted by Jonas are: *De fuga et inventione*, 208, about the meaning of the angel’s admonition to Hagar concerning Ishmael; translation by Colson-Whitaker in LCL: “For so doing thou shalt give birth with easy travail to a male offspring, Ishmael by name, since thou shalt have been chastened by hearkening to words of God; for “Ishmael” means “hearkening to God.” Hearing takes the second place, yielding the first to sight, and sight is the portion of Israel, the son free-born and first-born; for “seeing God” is the translation of “Israel.” It is possible to hear the false and take it for true, because hearing is deceptive, but sight, by which we discern what really is, is devoid of falseness.”; *De ebrietate*, 82; *De migratione Abrahami*, 47 and following. See also the more theoretical passages on seeing and hearing in *De Abrahamo*.

⁶See redaction criticism, R. Friedman, B. Halpern, et al., without going to the extremes of a G. Garbini, or especially a Thompson.

⁷But note the discussion by GELLER, *Sacred enigmas*, 47–48: wisdom literature seems to have a particular affinity for seeing and is pushed aside by the Dt authors who believe (still) in unmediated access to a transcendent being. I think the whole question is related to the politics of the 7th-5th c. The biblical authors of that time tend to explain history (their history) as the domain of a single, hidden, divinity’s agency,

¹GRAHAM, *Beyond the written word: oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion*, 149-51.

²Compare the study of these metaphors in: LEE, “The Gospel of John and the five senses.”

³“Heidegger et la théologie,” *Esprit* (July-August 1988), pp. 172–95. This text is a little more developed than the English version in the *Second Consultation on Hermeneutics, Drew University, 9-11 April 1964*.

⁴Perhaps one should say “Hellenistic,” since things are not so clear in Greek classical thought, at least in Thucydides.

Let's continue Jonas' thought. In his comment on Ex. 20.18, Philo, after the translators and even the editors of the Bible, perhaps following an ancient tradition, proposes that God's *logoi*, which are at the same time *erga* (and not *rhemata*), are meant to be seen.⁸ According to Philo, ears are to be converted into eyes (here too, one is in need of a phenomenology of the senses). The text of Ex 20.18 says "and the whole people saw the voices," (וראה כל העם את קולות) (וּרְאֵה כָּל הָעָם אֶת קוֹלוֹת). The voices, which originally in this story might have just meant thunder in the context of a theo- or kratophany, are in the plural. In Elijah's story, in 1 Kings 19, the natural elements are negated as source of divine inspiration, and God's voice itself is reduced to its simplest expression, silence. For Ex. 20.18, the standard Greek text we have has ξῶρα τῆν φωνήν, i.e. "saw the voice," in the singular.⁹

One might think there is no more here than the sort of metaphorical play that is frequent in many languages (e.g. the multiple meanings of the Breton verb *klevout*), or put to use in the synesthetic adventures of XIXth c. poetry, as in Baudelaire's magnificent poem, *Correspondances*, in which all the senses are gathered in a bouquet and there are rich fragrances "qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens." But allow me to speculate and propose that to give pride of place to sight and contemplation, i.e. to the clearest path to authenticity and objectifying rationality, may lead to inaction and therefore to disorder and death. This is a danger that the biblical tradition, post-exilic or older perhaps, attempts to avoid by setting obstacles to sight: clouds in the Sinai theophany, night vision, Yahweh seen from behind in Moses' story, etc.... To choose hearing, on the other hand, conceals other dangers, such as irrational adventurism, the mad rush after illusions and the all too easy acceptance of the absolute authority of prophets who claim to have heard voices. On the

side of sight, according to Jonas, one has the form (*eidoi*, idols, i.e. images), immediate presence, contemplation, real objects and concepts, the pride of autonomous reason, a self-affirming and -confirming subject. On the side of hearing, as Jonas again says, there is the call to mission, "rapture," the event, response, humility, and piety.

What of Heidegger and modern thought, then, in this regard, which is the topic of Jonas' paper? Heidegger's thought, he thinks, is very attractive to contemporary theology, because it invites one to "convert" one's objectifying eyes into ears ready to listen to a call (the ontological call).¹⁰ But under the modest appearance of this original philosophy which in fact has greatly and discreetly borrowed from the Jewish and Christian tradition, what is actually being used by imprudent theologians is a pagan ideology which is much bolder than any previous one. Its fundamental ideas are in contradiction with theology itself, for instance the notion of a thought without beginning or original (*anfänglich*), when theology starts from a given revelation. This has serious consequences for theology, because it finds itself serving the Heideggerian philosophy: the notion of a continuous revelation of being sets in, the ideas of salvation and redemption are threatened, etc....¹¹

FURTHER REMARKS ON SEEING AND HEARING

[a development on the effect of writing is needed here, perhaps following BOTTÉRO, HERRENSCHMIDT, and VERNANT, *L'Orient ancien et nous. L'écriture, la raison, les dieux*. How did the development of writing, especially completely alphabetic forms such as the Greek borrowing and development of Phoenician script, affect the use of the metaphors of hearing and seeing?]

Can one say that the more distant a thing is felt (or the more capable one is of feeling at a distance), the higher will the sense be placed on the scale of feelings? Could it be that for this reason, hearing is placed above other senses? Yet, it is not a fully assured place, since the sense of seeing reaches in the

which leads to the decreasing use of seeing as a metaphor and the insistence on hearing. It bypasses the visual politics of the time. This argument, however, would require looking at the use of metaphors in epigraphic and other royal writings.

⁸*De decalogo*, 47.

⁹One may wonder what Greek text Philo was reading, in which he found קולות (*qolot*) translated by the plural λόγοι or rather λόγους.

¹⁰P. 177 of the *Esprit* article.

¹¹A question: isn't a thought of the *anfänglich* a tradition in German mysticism, found for instance in Angelus Silesius?

far distance too (see Abraham, Jacob, the prophets). Modern psychological experiments show that people listening to a single message repeated by a person whom they see on screen and whose expression changes dramatically tend to focus on the expression and interpret it in a way that disregards what is being said. This might be less telling about the importance of the visual experience, however, because it could be the product of early and intense use of images in our culture, and the converse disregard of hearing (“obeying”).

On the other hand, the senses of touch and taste, which encompass things close to us, have been devalued because they are too easy to use (and require less interpretation??). Between hearing and seeing there will be a struggle, or rather a dance, as there is between the memory of seeing (photographic memory, or geographic memory, the remembrance or recomposing of places and colors, easier for some than for others) and the memory of sounds or sayings (less automatic, more difficult for some, and for that reason found of more value because it is less “natural,” more human). Both of these senses are found in the Bible. The writers who have edited the Bible and framed it in the shape it has now have given thought to this as much as the Greeks, because one finds both senses used metaphorically in the first biblical books, but together later, in strange turns of phrase like “Vision that was heard by so and so in the days of x”.

Seeing, a sense given pride of place by the Greeks who were followed by Philo as shows Jonas, was not left aside or discarded by the Biblical authors. To introduce it in some of these sayings was their way, I venture, to say that seeing (understanding) was as important as hearing (obeying) and that each alone, or an unmixed metaphor relying upon one sense only, was dangerous.

NOTE ON WITNESS

BENVENISTE, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* 2, 173–74 : about oath and witnesses. In Greek and many indo-european languages, proper witnessing (root wit-, as in video) demands seeing. In the oldest Latin oath, however, gods are asked to hear, not to be de visu witnesses. In Hebrew and

other Semitic traditions, is there the same use of basic metaphors?

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