

The Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible and the Challenge of its Iconographical Reception

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Abstract: *In the Hebrew Scripture, the representation of God is totally forbidden by the second commandment of the Decalogue. The Ten Commandments also debut with the categorical affirmation of the One God and with the prohibition to represent Him in some contingent form. Deuteronomy 4:12 is a development of this commandment, insisting that the anthropomorphic representation of God is forbidden, because “no appearance was visible to you, except the voice”. The voice of God becomes “visible”, revealing the personal God, God the Word. This study aims to answer at the following questions: How could the voice of God be visible? And how could it be represented iconographical? The representation of the Voice of God as a Hand from the Heaven is an iconographical compromise in the Jewish and Christian culture and remained a challenge for iconographers throughout history, till today.*

Keywords: *Divine Voice, Hand of God, Hebrew Bible, Old Testament.*

1. Introduction

In the Romanian Orthodox Church, 2017 is a Solemn Year of Holy Icons, Iconographers and Church Painters, an event dedicated to the reaffirmation of the value of holy icons as realities that induce in every man the encounter with God and with the saints of the Church in prayer.

In the Hebrew Scripture, the representation of God is totally forbidden, because in the cultural-religious polytheistic context of the Ancient Near East is the risk of appropriating such idolatrous practices, in discordance with the status of the chosen people as the holy people of the One and the Only God. The Ten Commandments of God also debut with the categorical affirmation of the One God and with the prohibition to represent Him in some contingent form, as the idols: Ex. 20:2-4 (Deut. 5:6-8): “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” [1].

The two commandments, which can be read as one, concerning the Uniqueness of God, invisible and unreproduced, find their echo throughout the Hebrew Scripture in texts like: Ex. 15:11; Lev. 26:1,13; Deut. 6:4.5; 2 Kings 17:29-35; Psalm 29:2; 81:9-10; Is. 46:9; Jer. 25:6. However, the revelation of God to the chosen people is not without form. The Prophets see God, distinguishing His revelation from anything else around. Moses sees “the glory of the LORD like a devouring fire on the top of the mount” (Ex. 24:17), and this manifestation of the form of Divinity has its “mark” in the matter of creation: “And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” (Ex. 24:10). The Divine presence is perceptible to man thanks to the mercy of God through an act of humiliation of divinity to the capability of man to see. The Anthropomorphism (as reported by the prophets in the scenes Is. 6:1-3; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9.13; 10:5-6) is thus a kenosis of God at the level of “the most expressive, most communicative of the meanings of the Supreme Image” [2]: the man.

2. Deuteronomy 4, 12 in context

It is obvious that Deut. 4, 12 responds to the first and second Commandments of the Decalogue, concerning the glorification of the only God and the prohibition of any representation of the Divinity. King James Version

translates the text Deut. 4:12: “And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice”. The text in the Romanian translation of Scripture is: “Iar Domnul v-a grăit de pe munte din mijlocul focului; și glasul cuvintelor Lui l-ați auzit, iar fața Lui n-ați văzut-o, ci numai glasul I l-ați auzit (And the Lord spake from the mount out of the midst of the fire; and you have heard the voice of his words, but you have not seen his face, only the voice we have heard)”. My literal translation of the Hebrew text is: “And the Lord your God spake out of the midst of the fire, and the voice of the words ye heard, no appearance was visible to you except the voice”.

We could say that Deut. 4 is a theological commentary of the Decalogue, a development of these theological ideas on the basis of historical experience. The Deuteronomist affirms clearly that God cannot be represented iconographical, because He has no *temunah* (appearance, form) from and in this world.

This does not mean that God is without form, but that the *temunah* was never visible to man. Moreover, the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae argues: “The Reason, as *usia*, subsists always in the form of persons in a mutual relationship” [3].

St. Theodore the Studite, quoted by Father Stăniloae, considers that God, according to His nature, is uncircumscribed, but according to His hypostasis He is circumscribed. Paul Evdokimov and Olivier Clement insisted that God has a form and the absence of the face would be a lack of fullness of God [4]. “God is the form of forms, the icon of icons, the all-encompassing archetype. Apophatic is not a pure negation, she wants to say that God is a Metaicon, according to Dionysius' terminology, a Hyper-icon” [5].

The denial of the *temunah* vision does not mean denying its existence, but placing the Divinity above any form and any appearance. Thus, the denial of the image is not the opposite of his assertion, but the invitation to an apophatic discovery, which goes beyond assertions and negations. Deut. 4, 12 does not speak about the absence of the image of God, but about the fact that the image-form-the divine appearance is above all, is an indescribable, a “hyper-icon”. This is the “iconographic apophatism” [6].

Just because the Divine Existence has a form, He has a voice. He is not only the source of all images, but also of all sounds, of all words. His image is in an ontological connection with the supreme Voice. The aniconic voice has as source the meta-image of God, which is “seen” only by the presence of the Word. The voice is the one that shows up, which reveals what is only felt as a presence.

Deut. 4 insists further on the fact that God cannot be represented by any kind of image and gives examples of such images: “Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, The likeness of anything that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth: And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven” (Deut. 4:16-19). So, these formulations are interdictions to use the creation to represent the Creator and, more specifically, forbid the cult of deities, the idolatry. The text has a clear polemical character on the idols.

Deut. 4, 12 refers to the Revelation of God on Sinai, but, surprisingly, he does not warn that the encounter of man with God would mean the destruction, the death. In Ex. 33:20, God warns Moses: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live”. In the revelation of God to Moses from the midst of the burning bush: “Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex. 3:6). The same fear encompasses Elijah, who “he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave” (1 Kings 19:13). The proof that this is not just a threat is the history of the fleeing of Lot and his wife from Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:17.26), where the looking back to the manifestation of the Lord's anger is punished with hardness. The text in Deuteronomy makes a discordant note of all this texts and he is silent about any penalty with death of those who meets God.

The emphasis in the text is that Jahwe is a phonic God, He communicates and He is communicated, and in this way is totally different from the idols. God's call in the prayer receives always a response, a voice, while the invocation of idols, made often “with a great voice”, remains without any “voice” or “response” from the pagan

deities (1 Kings 18:26). The idea of 1 Kings 18:26 is strengthened by the Psalmist, who shows that the invocation of idols does not receive any answer, any “voice”. They have mouths, but cannot speak, they have ears, but cannot hear, they have eyes, but cannot see: “They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not” (Ps. 115:5). The anthropomorphic disability of man-made idols does not reduce, in the sense of the prophet Isaiah, to mutilation and deafness, but includes weaknesses that would characterize rather a morbid being: “They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove: yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble” (Is. 46:7).

Beyond the polemic against idols, there is a doctrine of revelation: God is revealed, but it is still hidden from the other peoples, and is revealed to them only a little. And in a world marked by polytheism, the images of divinity do not make sense. On the contrary, they threaten the chosen people to fall back into the history marked by polytheism. Therefore, behind this text is the doctrine of monotheism. Although it is part of the same Semitic religious framework, the God of Israel completely differs from the other gods of the Near East peoples. The unity and uniqueness of Yahweh are expressed in the Scripture of the Old Testament in a clear, specific way, compared to the same attributes granted to pagan divinities by the scriptures of other peoples. God's immutable identity is revealed positively through his manifestations and testimonies, but also negatively, by denying all other deities. Only about Yahweh is said that He is the One and the Unique, and the other deities are without existence (Deut. 32:39; Jer. 10:10-12), are only human creations of wood and stone (Is. 37:19; 44:13-20). “No one is like the Lord” often proclaims Yahweh through His prophets: Ex. 8:10; Deut. 33:26; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 7:22; Jer. 10:6-7.10).

The Decalogue commandment of Deut. 5, 8 and Ex. 20, 4 emphasizes the prohibition of the image in worship. Thus, at this stage, the ban on honouring idols goes further, turning into a total ban on the image. Because “no one saw the appearance of God on Sinai, it is not allowed to give any form to God”.

The particularity of Deut. 4, 12 is precisely the fact that it excludes from the commandment of the prohibition of the image the divine voice, because “no appearance was visible to you, except the voice”. How could the voice of God be visible? And if so, how could it be represented iconographical?

3. The Voice of God in the Hebrew Scripture

The noun *qol* appears in the Hebrew Scriptures 560 times [7]. Most often, *qol* refers to spoken (Gen. 3:17) or written (2 Kings 10:6) words, to sounds of man, to one's voice, to sounds of nature (water droop, the leaf of the trees etc.). Of interest to our research theme are the over 50 texts in which *qol* has as subject God: the Divine Voice. Thus, some biblical references draw our attention.

Adam hears the voice of God in the coolness of the evening (Gen. 3:8.10). In Paradise, man has the experience of direct dialogue with God, His Creator (Gen. 2:16.19; 3:3). The knowledge therefore comes through communion, by participation, by man's opening to God, by internalizing of the One, present in front of his eyes, the One Who is communicating. The expulsion from the Garden of Eden is the beginning of God's silence for man, and, as history will show it, the beginning of many human speech (like at the Tower of Babel) and the “speaking” of idols, to which man once again responds to the challenges.

God speaks from the Ark of the Covenant, from the mountain or from heaven, from the Throne of Mercy (Ex. 25:22; Num. 7:89; Ex. 20:22).

In Exodus, the voice of God and the voice of Moses interfere (cf. Ex. 3:18; 4:1; 7:1) God gives Moses certain signs that “speak” (Ex. 4:8) miraculously, confirming the power of God.

Moses' commandments are the human expression of God's commandments (or voice). If the people listen to Moses, they actually obey God, and in this is the obedience under the Covenant (Ex. 19:5): “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine”. The voice of God announces the judgment, but also the blessing (Ex. 19:16; cf. 2 Sam. 22:7-14; 2 Sam. 3:16 etc.). The law that Moses received from Yahweh on Mount Sinai is the Covenant between God and the people Israel. The words of Moses are in fact the “Commandments” of the Lord, to which no one is

allowed to add anything: “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2).

The thunder symbolizes the absolute sovereignty of God, evoking fear (Ex. 9:23,29; cf. Psalm 29). The tone is his voice, as the Psalmist says: “At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away” (Ps. 104:7).

The trumpet's voice is another form of manifestation of power (Josh. 6:5) and of the presence of God (2 Sam. 6:15; 1 Kings 1:40-45; 1 Cor. 15:52).

The prophets refer to the words of the Lord, but not to His voice, except Is. 6:8 and Ezek. 1:28-29. Attention is to the message, not to the sound.

In all texts where *qol* appears in relation to God, the emphasis is not on the strong, frightening sound, but on the intelligible voice.

As we have already shown, the possibility of receiving the Law of God is facilitated by the human “coat” of the Word of God. To teaching the Sinaitic Law, Moses is the “chosen” prophet of God and the representative of the people: “Go thou near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it” (Deut. 5:27). This is the reason why Moses is so particularly: because he heard the Voice of the Lord in Sinai: “Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire” (Deut. 4:36) [8].

The voice of God calls to prophecy, to be His voice among the people: “Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Is. 6:8). The voice of God is not at the man’s disposal. The man cannot control it. In the prophetic act, when God is silent, man must also be silenced. That explain why false prophets don’t have communion with God and are outside any dialogue with Him, says Jeremiah, in 23:21b: “I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied”. The prophetic urge is to “silence and obey”, because the listening to God's words means, first of all, the silence of man's loquacity and the sharpening of hearing for a different message than the everyday one.

The listening of the Divine Voice must lead to the observance of the Law (Deut. 4:30; 8:20 etc.). The question is: Why should Moses teach these laws to the people and not just to make them known? On the one hand, Israel's “rebirth” in the Sinai desert is not only a social or religious one but also a cultural one. The people Israel become a community that is taught and taught. For this, Moses is the first “teacher” and the guarantor of religious identity over generations. On the other hand, the teaching of Laws has a practical logic: the Commandments must be taught to be remembered and fulfilled in the Promised Land. The duty of the Israelites as parents is to pass on to the future generations, the children, the words of the Lord, as a testimony of the faith in Yahweh's pronation, in the history of his chosen people (Deut. 6:20-25). At the same time, the obedience to God's Voice is also the condition of a genuine service (Josh. 24:24) and obedience (Jer. 3:13).

The Hebrew *qol* is translated into the Greek text of the Scriptures through Φωνή. The noun appears more than 600 times in Septuagint (LXX), where the revelation of God is always through word (voice). LXX translates the passages that speak about the revelation of God, leaving aside the visual elements, that become marginal to the event (as is the case of Ex. 24:9ff.; Job 19:25ff).

Φωνή appears 139 times in the New Testament, only isolated in the Epistles and 55 times in the Revelation, where it has a special theological significance, because the one who emanates the voice is God, Christ and the prophets [9]. Except Acts 7:31: “When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord (φωνή κυρίου) came unto him”, God is not called directly. The voice comes from “the heavens” (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) (Mark 1:11; John 12:28; Acts 11:9; Rev. 10:4, 8; 11:12; 14:2a.13.14; 18:4), “from the clouds” (Mark 9:7), or “from the Temple” (Rev. 16:1.17). These expressions can refer to the angels' voices, as it appears explicitly in Rev. 5:2.11

John 5:37 rejects any law based on Deut. 4:12. Revelation reaches the maximum through the Incarnation of the Logos. He who hears His voice, will have eternal life (John 5:25.28).

At the Baptism of Christ, a voice from heaven confirms His Messianity. God the Father speaks to Christ,

God the Son (Mark 1:11). At the Transfiguration, the voice is heard from heaven (Mark 9:7), confirming that Christ is the Son of God.

4. The Challenge of the iconographic representation of God's voice

We can conclude that the voice of God is the audible manifestation of His Almighty and of His Humility, as a manifestation of the fullness of His love. The words of Hebrew Scripture are the manifestation of the Word of God, the Reason of Revelation. God's revelation takes the audible form. He is heard, but he is not seen. No appearance of God is visible, except the voice (Deut. 4:12). Only His Voice is "seen" (Deut 4:12), because it is a personal manifestation of God. In Ex. 19:16ff the reference is at the noise of the appearance of the Lord, but the emphasis is not on the sound, but on the intelligible voice, as a manifestation of the Presence, of the Existence: Deut. 4:36: "Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire". The experience of the hearing of the Voice is the experience of a meeting. From here is the personification of the voice, as in the Proverbs. The personified wisdom is the voice of God (Prov. 1:20; 8:1; cf. Is. 18:23).

Therefore, later, in the extra-biblical Jewish literature, *qol* becomes an exponent of the Divine Name, and the end of the prophetic period means the beginning of the manifestation of the *bat qol*, the "daughter of the voice" [10].

Bat qol comes from heaven. God the Holy Spirit or God the Father is the one who conveys it. She is not a prophet's voice. Its goal is to announce the judgment, to call for repentance, to announce a disaster or to accuse. Most often *Bat qol* address to the people, sometimes condemning sinners, sometimes warning the righteous.

At the time of the Tannaim, *bat qol* was understood not as the direct voice of God, beyond the sensible, but as the echo (the daughter) of the divine voice. *Bat qol* talks in Israel since prophecy has ceased. The attributes of God's Voice are the invisibility of the One who speaks and some remarkable sound qualities, regarding his power. A sound with an invisible source comes from heaven, while the revelation on Sinai is from God. From here is the representation of the voice as a hand descending from the heavens.

5. Seeing the Voice of God

God reveals to man through the hearing, not through the sight. The prophet Ezekiel, who sees many visions, "hears the voice of one who speaks to him" (Ezek. 1:28). Similarly, Elijah recognizes God after the "slow voice" addressed to him (I Kings 19:12-13; Job 4:16). Sometimes the voice of God is heard from Jerusalem, from Zion (Ezek. 1:25; Jer 25:30; Joel 3:16-17; Amos 1:2 etc.), in thunder.

Despite the fact that the Jewish tradition forbids the representation of God in any way, the late Jewish art represented *Bat qol* as the Hand of God. The Dura-Europos Synagogue is the obvious proof of this iconographic representation. The Christians have adopted this representation easily for the relevant scenes of the New Testament, as *Vox dei*. The reason is obvious: the anthropomorphic representation of the Father was unacceptable, seen as a violation of the Second Commandment, and the hand could be an iconographic compromise. The Hand of God descends from heaven (showing that God is present), blessing and prophesying, indicates an action, most often a prophetic one (as a Divine Voice). The Motif of God's Hand as a representation of the Divine Voice appears in the late Antiquity and during the Middle Ages.

In the Byzantine art of the first millennium, the Hand of God is very rarely represented. The dilemma of Iconographers was not just the anthropomorphic character of God's Father's representation through the hand, but how could it be a bodiless hand? The iconographic solution was the painting of the cloud hiding the body. And to avoid any anthropomorphism, the iconographers represented only the breath of the Voice, the power of the divine words, a book or words that descend from heaven.

6. Conclusion

The second commandment of the Decalogue forbids categorically the representation of God in any form. Deut. 4:12 is a development of this commandment, insisting that the anthropomorphic representation of God is

forbidden, because in the Sinaitic revelation was no visible form of God, only the voice. The voice of God appears, becomes "visible", perceptible to senses, revealing the personal God, God the Word. The Incarnation of the Son of God, "the Word descended from heaven", as the Evangelist John describes Him, meant the possibility to an iconographic representation of the Second Person of the Trinity God. The iconographic representation of God the Father, who speaks from Heaven at the Baptism and at the Transfiguration of Christ, remained a challenge for iconographers throughout history. The taking over of the image of "the talking hand" (*Bat qol*) from Judaism to Christianity meant an iconographic compromise, for which there was no consensus in iconography till today.

7. Acknowledgment

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8. References

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