

Interpreting the *visio Dei* in Matthew 5:8

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The academic study of the biblical text often depends on the naïve assumption that a researcher can obtain stable knowledge of the single meaning of a text. This article investigated how the *visio Dei* in Matthew 5:8 has led to a variety of concepts through the centuries. This proves how different readers come to different readings. Interpreters should be aware of how their contexts impact on their understanding of meaning, but should also realise how taking cognisance of the wide variety of readings could enrich their own interpretation.

Introduction

In the modern era, especially since the 18th century, the academic study of the biblical text depended largely on the assumption that by means of scientific methods a researcher could obtain a secure knowledge of the single meaning of the text. By using scientific methods the exegete assumed to be able to obtain a solid and objective result. In ecclesiastical circles where the results of historical study of the Bible were not always welcomed, the same epistemology influenced its study, albeit that in these instances a creed provided the solid foundation that guided understanding. With these scholarly meticulous methods, on the one hand, and less sophisticated methods, on the other, it was thought that one would be able to unlock the real and only meaning of a text. Furthermore, it was assumed that exegetes would have a neutral and receptive audience who would easily accept that one true meaning. These assumptions, however, are problematic.

Illuminating this issue, it is quite useful to consult the history of interpretation. From such an investigation it soon becomes clear how interpretations can differ. Such differences often prove to be the result of differing confessional views or ideas from specific eras or communities. Dale Allison (2005) conducted an interesting investigation of how several passages in Matthew were interpreted through the ages. One of these investigations was on the sixth beatitude. This investigation warrants further attention, which I attempt in this article. I examine Allison's findings, which demonstrate different interpretations of the *visio Dei* of this beatitude, and then attend to how the ideological background of these exegetes influenced their interpretation.

The sixth of Matthew's collection of the beatitudes or *macarisms*¹ of Jesus² (μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ὄψονται ['Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' {Mt 5:8}]) promises the *visio Dei* to those who are pure in heart. Scholars usually focus on the meaning and intention of the first part of this beatitude³ (the matrix sentence), whilst very little attention is paid to the second part (the motivating clause introduced by ὅτι [for]) (cf. Viljoen 2008:207). The problem with the understanding of this *macarism* starts with the problem of two biblical traditions with regard to the seeing of God. The first states that no one can see the face of God and remain living (e.g. Ex 3:6, 19:21, 33:20; Jn 1:18; 1 Tm 6:15–16). The second tradition regards the seeing of God as a blessed goal for this life or the life here after (Job 19:26; Ps 11:7, 17:15; Rv 22:4). The question that then arises is how the promise of Matthew 5:8 would correlate with these traditions?

Commentators generally explain 'seeing God' as an eschatological hope. Such an interpretation somehow solves the problem of the seeming contradiction between these traditions. John Calvin

1. Various scholars have indicated that the beatitudes were common pronouncements in the Greek language (cf. Van Aarde 1994:163). As such, some *formgeschichtlichen* and *gattungsgeschichtlichen* studies have been done on the beatitudes. Koch (1974:21–23) is a prominent exponent arguing for a *gattungsgeschichtlichen* past lying behind the series of beatitudes.

2. The set of beatitudes (not necessarily as the *ipsissima verba Jesu*, cf. Van der Walt 2006:251) with which Matthew begins the Sermon on the Mount, differs quite significantly from those recorded by Luke. Luke sets his beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain and only gives four beatitudes, balancing them with four woe sayings, whilst the wording differs in the beatitudes which Matthew and Luke share. In an attempt to explain the difference between the Matthean and Lukan versions of the beatitudes, Van Bruggen (1990:85) suggests that '*Beide evangelisten hebben echter uit de stellig langere bergrede hun eigen keuze gemaakt*'. This argument, however, does not explain the difference of wording between Luke and Matthew's version of obviously the same beatitudes. Koch (1974:21–23) provides a more acceptable explanation by arguing that the beatitudes did not originate as a series, but as single aphorisms that were collected at a later stage.

3. The concept of purity of heart is presupposed rather than explained. It implies internal purity and morality symbolised by external and ritual purification (Luz 1990:239). One can assume that the hearers would remember Psalm 51:10: 'Create me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me' (Betz 1995:134).

(1979:264), for example, merely commented on the second part of the beatitude by stating that 'they shall enjoy the sight of God in heaven'. Hagner (1993:94) offers a similar explanation: '... the righteous in the eschatological age will experience the beatific vision.' Luz (1990:239) states: 'The promise is meant eschatologically' and with the eschaton 'all separation from God and all obscurity will disappear'. These explanations obviously concur with the promise recalled in Revelations 22:4, according to which the righteous will see the face of God in the eschatological age.

However, on grammatical grounds, there are more possibilities of how the promise of the beatitude can be interpreted. Obviously these options deserve consideration in resolving the seeming contradiction between the warning that no one can remain living when seeing the face of the Lord (e.g. Ex 33:20) and the promise in the sixth beatitude. In this article, I consider interpretations that were proposed by theologians from differing theological viewpoints to illustrate how one's ideology can influence one's understanding of a text. I continue by briefly exploring the concept of seeing God in other biblical texts, as well as in extra-biblical material. Finally, I conclude by indicating the interesting dynamic of textual interpretation, which emerges from this investigation.

Interpretation of the *visio Dei* through the ages

Different concepts of the *visio Dei* have developed through the centuries, each significantly related to the ideological background of different readers. The following overview illustrates this point.

Encountering a corporeal deity

Up through the 4th and 5th centuries there were quite a number of people who claimed to have had encounters with the embodied God in their current life (Paulsen 1990:105–116). The influential author, theologian, and Christian bishop, Theodoret of Cyrillus (c.393–c.457 AD), reported of martyrs who claimed to have seen 'with the eyes the divine Trinity' (*Historia Ecclesiae* 4.11) and 'they claim haughtily to see the Father and the Son and the all-Holy Spirit with the eyes of the body' (*Haeresis* 4.11). This claim formed part of his defence against the Nestorians, for whilst Nestorianism emphasises the disunion between the human and divine natures of Jesus, Theodoret argued that God is immutable also in becoming man. In his early years, Theodoret argued that Jesus Christ had two natures and two hypostases. Later, he moved towards a distinction between Jesus' one hypostasis and his two natures (divine and human). These two natures are separate in Christ and God the *Logos* is ever immortal and impassive. Each nature remained 'pure' after the union, retaining its properties to the exclusion of all transmutation and intermixture (Lane 2007:57).

A priest of the Eastern Orthodox communion, Timothy of Constantinople, who died in 523 AD, wrote:

the all-holy and life-giving and blessed Trinity, which is by nature invisible to every creature, can be seen with the eyes of the flesh by those who have come into what they call *apatheia*; and to such people alone occurs the vision seen by them bodily. (*Haeresis* 86.48–49)

He adopted the doctrine of Monophysiticism, which formed an antithesis to Nestorianism. Monophysiticians argued that Jesus' humanity and Deity had fused. They believed that Christ had a human body and human 'living principle' but that the Divine *Logos* had taken the place of the *nous*, or 'thinking principle' (Lane 2007:69). The *visio Dei* of which Jesus would be the object could therefore be an experience of this life.

One of the earliest comments on Matthew 5:6b occurs in the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*⁴ 17.7: God 'has shape, and He has every limb primarily and solely for beauty's sake, and not for use. For He has not eyes that He may see with them, for He sees on every side' and 'God has the most beautiful shape on account of humanity, that the pure in heart may be able to see Him'. The *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* are documents of the early Christian church, most likely from the 3rd century, though probably utilising some material which is considerably older. Despite their relatively late date, the Homilies provide useful resources of the views of early 1st-century Jewish Christianity on the Trinity. Whilst affirming reverence for Jesus, they did not claim that Jesus was the 'ontological' Son of God; thus, seeing God can be experienced in this life, albeit God, and not Jesus, is the object of this vision.

Not all of the early Christians agreed that God is a bodily Deity. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regius (354–430 AD), rejected this belief of a corporeal Deity: 'there are some who assume that God himself is a corporeal Deity' (*Epistulae* 147.49). Augustine sought insight into the persons and substance of the Trinity by way of human analogies. Eventually he recognised that even the best analogy is imperfect, remarking that we now only see but a poor reflection as in a mirror (1 Cor 13:12) (*De Trinitate* 9.1; cf. Lane 2007:52). Clement of Rome (Pope Clement I), who was regarded as the first apostolic father of the church, argued in a similar manner:

God is seen by the mind, not by the body, by the spirit, not by the flesh. And so angels, who are spirits, see God; and so people, as long as they are people, are unable to see Him. But after the resurrection of the dead, when they have been made like the angels, they will be able to see God ... a time will come when people will be made angels, who in the spirit of their mind will see God. (*Recognitiones* 3.30)

Facing Jesus with his *parousia*

Matthew, in a number of places (Mt 16:28, 23:39, 24:30, 26:64), promises that people will someday see the returning Jesus. The idea of facing Jesus correlates with other New Testament writings. In John 14:9, Jesus says that anyone who has seen

⁴The *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* are documents which purport to contain a record made by Pope Clement I of discourses involving the apostle Peter, together with an account of the circumstances under which Clement came to be Peter's travelling companion.

him, has seen the Father and Colossians 1:15 describes Jesus as the image of the invisible God.⁵ Gundry (1994:71) suggests that Matthew 5:8 probably refers to Jesus' *parousia*. The vision of God would refer to the sight of Jesus when he will return in glory as described in Matthew 24:30 and 26:64. This interpretation was also entertained by at least a few early Christians.

A correlating interpretation that the object of the vision would be Jesus had surfaced in a Gnostic manner already within the 3rd-century text of the Acts of Thomas, chapter 94. Ten beatitudes of Jesus are described in this chapter, of which the eighth reads: 'Blessed are you meek, because you will see the face of the Lord (τοῦ κυρίου).' In the very next line the Lord is identified with Jesus. This early 3rd-century text is one of the most Gnostic of the New Testament apocrypha. Jesus is portrayed as the 'Heavenly Redeemer', independent of and beyond creation. He can free souls from the darkness of this world. The believer is connected to the Heavenly Redeemer by way of the *gnosis*, an intimately personal kind of knowledge (Roukema 2004:125). They who have obtained this *gnosis* of the divine rather than faith will be able to see the Christ as Heavenly Redeemer.

However, it is quite unlikely that this Christological interpretation was the intention of (Matthew's) Jesus. Matthew never directly calls Jesus Θεός⁶ and the only other *visio Dei* Matthew describes clearly refers to God the Father – 'their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven (Mt 18:10). The *visio Dei* in Matthew 18:10 implies a direct encounter, as the angels could see the face of the Father in heaven. Augustine (*Epistulae* 92.4) argued along similar lines stating that the promise that the pure in heart would see God implies that the impure will not see him. However, Matthew states elsewhere that, with the *parousia* of Jesus, both the righteous and the unrighteous will see him (Mt 24:30, 25:32, 26:64). Seeing Jesus with the *parousia* obviously refers to a different encounter from the one envisaged in this beatitude.

Mystical experience

Besides the gnostical interpretation of the beatitude in the Gospel of Thomas, the idea of a mystical vision was entertained in several other documents. A fragment from the Gnostic theologian Valentinus (c.100–160 AD) demonstrates such a mystical interpretation of Matthew 5:8b:

When the Father, who alone is good, visits the heart, He makes it holy and fills it with light. And so a person who has such a heart is called blessed, for that person will see God. (Preserved in Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortationes* 10.5)

The Syriac deacon and a prolific Syriac-language hymnographer and theologian of the 4th century, Ephraem the Syrian, explained Matthew 5:8b in terms of Exodus 3, where Moses encountered God's presence without seeing God directly and that he could only see God indirectly

5. Yet John and the author of Colossians do not refer to the *parousia*.

6. Matthew describes Jesus as 'Immanuel' and 'God with us' (Mt 1:23) but he never directly called him 'God'. Accordingly, Jesus in Matthew never identifies himself explicitly as God.

from his back (Ex 33). He remarked: 'Those who are pure in heart will see God, like Moses' (Commentaries on the *Diatesseron* 6.1).

Byzantine Hesychasts developed the interpretation of a fully realised mystical vision. According to them, the blessing of this beatitude, according to which the pure in heart can in this life even see the light of Christ, is manifested in his transfiguration. Based on Christ's injunction in the Gospel of Matthew to 'go into your closet to pray', Hesychasm engaged in a process of retiring inwardly by ceasing to register the senses, in order to achieve an experiential knowledge of God. Their goal was the vision of the divine light and union with God. The pre-eminent theologian of Hesychasm and venerated saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church Gregory of Palamas (1296–1359) wrote in 'Sermon for the Feast of the presentation of the blessed virgin in the temple':

He who participates in divine energy ... is united to the light and with the light he sees in full consciousness all that remains hidden for those who have not this grace ... for the pure in heart see God ... who, being the light, abides in them and reveals Himself to those who love Him. (*Triades* 1.3.42)

Whilst the mind cannot penetrate to God, he can be known in experience (Lossky 1974:61). Gregory distinguished between God's essence and energy. Believers cannot know or participate in his essence, his innermost being, but they can participate in God's energies, his activities and his grace (*Triades* 3.2.24). Human beings can know God through the vision of the divine, uncreated light. It is the same light that was seen by the apostles at the transfiguration of Jesus (Mk 9:2–8). One can see the uncreated light of God himself; thus, one sees not the essence but the energies of God. Gregory succeeded in integrating Hesychasm into Orthodox Theology, yet the Western Church did not accept Gregory's teaching and this difference became a further point of division between the Eastern and Western Church (Lane 2007:81). Nevertheless, medieval theologians did, quite generally, accept the possibility of obtaining some sort of beatific vision in the present life (Davies & Allison 2004:457).

Obtaining spiritual insight

The early Christian scholar and theologian, Origen (c.185–254 AD), proposed a metaphorical interpretation according to which the beatitude does not refer to physical sight but to spiritual apprehension: 'By this divine sense therefore, not of the eyes but of a pure heart, that is the mind, God can be seen by those who are worthy' (*De Principiis* 1.1.9). Origen thought that the Bible could not be understood properly without the use of allegory and, as such, his conception of God is apophatic. In apophatic theology attempt is made to achieve unity with the Divine Good through discernment. This stands in contrast to the gaining of knowledge of God and describing what God is. The apophatic tradition is often allied with the approach of mysticism. It focuses on an individual experience of the divine reality beyond the realm of ordinary perception of the 'outer' human being. God is regarded as a perfect unity, invisible and incorporeal,

transcending all things material and therefore inconceivable and incomprehensible. He is likewise unchangeable and transcends space and time. Origen wrote that the human soul passes through successive stages of incarnation before eventually reaching God. For him, the essence of salvation was to become like God, being 'deified' through contemplating God. 'The knowledgeable Christian will penetrate beyond the earthly Jesus to the eternal Word and achieve salvation through contemplating Him' (Lane 2007:21). The human multitude is capable of sensual vision only, but those who comprehend the hidden meaning of Scripture and the diverse mysteries can see God in contemplation. For Origen, God was the First Principle, and Christ, the *Logos*, was subordinate to him. He taught a 'graded' Trinity: the Father is greater than the Son, who is greater than the Holy Spirit. The fourth level of being is occupied by rational beings (i.e. humans). Each level participates in the being of the level above. Thus the Son participates in the deity of the Father and human beings can participate in the Son (the Holy Spirit is often ignored in practice). Seeing God implies the participation of human beings in the deity of the Son in an apophatic⁷ manner (where God is referred to in negative terms in what he is not).

The Roman Catholic tradition also followed an allegorical interpretation of the vision of Matthew 5:8. Gregory the Great (pope from 590 AD to 604 AD) viewed this vision as an imageless perception of the divine essence (*Magna Moralia* 2.3). The eye of the heart must be lifted to the invisible by ways of contemplation (*Regula Pastoralis* 2.5).

Isho'dad of Merv was a native of the city of Merv (currently in Turkmenistan) and became bishop of Hadatha in the mid-9th century. He wrote commentaries on most of the books of both the Old and the New Testaments and is considered to be one of the most important representatives of the traditional biblical exegesis of the Assyrian Church of the East. He commented similarly on the *visio Dei*:

God is seen only by faith. Faith, it is said is the persuasion about those things that are in hope ... and the revelation of things not seen; God is seen also in his works ... but the organ of this vision is a pure heart that is not attached to earthly things. He calls sight the light and revelation which the soul receives inwardly by knowledge about Him. (Commentaries on Matthew 3 and 5:8)

In the Protestant tradition, Schleiermacher (1768–1834) also interpreted this vision of God as an experience of God in this life followed by an eventual eschatological vision in the life here after (1963:719). For Schleiermacher, religion is more than mere theology and ethics, knowledge and action, knowing and doing the right things. Religion belongs to the realm of feeling. True religion implies the sensing and tasting of the infinite. Jesus Christ did not come to atone sins but to arouse in humans the consciousness of God. The difference between Jesus and other human beings lies in the fact that Jesus experienced a perfect consciousness of God in every moment, whilst other humans' consciousness of God is obscured and powerless (Lane 2007:238). Seeing God implies such perfect consciousness of God.

⁷This is in contrast to the cataphatic view where God is defined positively in what he is.

A.B. Bruce was a parish minister and Professor of Apologetics and New Testament Exegesis at the Free Church Divinity Hall in Glasgow. His theological approach arose out of an early experience of wrestling with doubt, which produced in him a particular sensitivity to the doubts of others. He also proposed a metaphorical interpretation (1912:99). This vision should be interpreted as a Christian's insight when wrestling to understand everyday life in relation to God's providence. Such metaphorical interpretations relate to John 1:18 ('No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known') where the vision of God is the same as knowledge of God. Similarly, Paul equated seeing God with the knowledge of God:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor 13:12)

Seeing God in the new heaven and earth

Augustine wrote his *De Civitatis Dei* between 413 AD and 427 AD. In this work he compares two different cities or societies: the city of God and the city of Satan, the heavenly and the earthly city – Jerusalem and Babylon. The one community is predestined to reign eternally with God, the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil. The eyes of the people who belong to the city of God are fixed on the heaven. Their faith does not offer temporal worldly success but eternal destiny. In the eternal destiny the Christian will experience the perfected new world. In correlation with Romans 1:20, where Paul wrote that God's invisible qualities can be seen from the things he made, Augustine proposed the idea that the perfected saints will see God in the new world:

We will then see the physical bodies of the new heaven and the new earth in such a fashion as to observe God in utter clarity and distinctiveness, seeing Him present everywhere and governing the whole material scheme of things by means of the bodies we will then inhabit and the bodies (portraying the image of God) we will see wherever we turn our eyes. (*De Civitatis Dei* 22.29)

Recognising God in sanctified people

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 AD to after 394 AD) proposes that God will be seen in restored human beings. In the eschatological paradise, the image of God that was originally reflected in Adam and Eve, and was obscured by sin, will be restored. Even in the here and the now as saints grow in purity of heart, God becomes more visible in their lives (*Oratio Domini de beatitudes* 6.4). As one of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory attempted to establish Christian philosophy as superior to Greek philosophy. Related to this is Gregory's idea of *epektasis* or constant progress. Gregory described the ideal of human perfection as constant progress in virtue and godliness. Humanity's goal is to become more and more perfect. Humanity must become more and more like God, even though humanity will never understand, much less attain God's transcendence. This idea has had a profound influence on the Eastern Orthodox teaching regarding *theosis* or 'divinization'. Particularly in Eastern Orthodox theology, *theosis* refers to the attainment of likeness to or union with God. This is regarded as the final stage of this process of

transformation and, as such, is the goal of the spiritual life. *Theosis* is the third of three stages; the first being purification (*katharsis*), the second, illumination (*theoria*), after which sainthood (*theosis*) follows. By means of purification a person comes to illumination and then sainthood. Sainthood is the participation of the person in the life of God, which enables them to see God (Gross 2003:54).

Luther (Sermon of 1519 II, 5) had a slightly different but related idea of the vision of God. In protest against the papacy and its extravagancy, he favoured simplicity. God is seen in the meek. He stated that one should not strive into the heights to see God but into the depths of the humble. One should 'seek God in the miserable, erring and laboring ones ... that is where one sees God; there the heart becomes pure, and all arrogance lies down' (cf. Luz 1990:240).

Looking at the history of interpretation of Matthew 5:8, it is apparent how a wide variety of interpretations of the idea of the vision of God has developed. One can recognise how doctrinal developments and ideological preferences impacted on the reading of this text, for readers often sculpt the content they discover.

References to the vision of God in other literature

Besides the reference to *visio Dei* in Matthew 5:8, it is also paramount to take note of the co-texts of this statement. The pre-history, current history and post-history of an idea provides its context and impacts on its content. Relatively few references to a vision of God are found in biblical literature. In contrast to this scarcity, visions of heaven and of God are quite common in other literature, such as apocalyptic (1 Enoch 1:2, 14:15–25, 71:5–17; 4 Ezr 7:87–101), Rabbinism and Christian and Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism. Investigating visions of God in Hellenistic texts also proves to be illuminating in this regard (cf. Michaelis 1967:315–382).

Jewish references

Old Testament references

Quite a number of Old Testament passages refer to God in anthropomorphic terms, for example, God announces his intention to create people 'in our image and likeness' (Gn 1:26–27), God walks in the garden of Eden (Gn 3:8), Moses sees God's back (Ex 33:23) and Moses knew God face to face (Dt 34:10) (cf. Miller 1972:289–304). But the visions of God can be limited to visionary prophetic seeing (e.g. the night visions of Zechariah), restrained Theophanies as Moses experienced (Ex 3 etc.) and seeing God in a transferred sense (e.g. Job 19:26–27).

The closest parallel in the Old Testament to the vision of God, as depicted in Matthew 5:8, can be found in Psalm 24. The temple entrance liturgy as described in this classic passage of Psalm 24:3–6 provides the ideas needed for the beatitude. In verse 3 the question is posed: 'Who may ascend the hill of

the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?' The answer is given in verses 4–6:

He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Saviour. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob. (Ps 24:4–6)

Psalm 24 refers to the experience of the presence of God which could be interpreted as a spiritual vision of God.

Jewish Mystics

In the time of Matthew, analogues in the form of mysticism did exist in the Jewish world. Epiphanies of God did not come in the form of personal appearances, but as glorious manifestations of his power. Distinction was made between the divine substance and divine appearance (Scholem 1961:63–67). Epiphanies of God's glory (δόξα) manifested his presence whilst at the same time concealed him. These thoughts were based on a similar interpretation of biblical texts. God met Moses in a burning bush (Ex 3), where he encountered God's presence without seeing God directly. Later on, Moses again saw God indirectly from the back (Ex 33). God led Israel through the desert in an obscured manner as a glowing column and cloud (Ex 16:10).

However, in the *Merkabah* mystics accounts are given of visions of a bodily God. They even described the details of God's body (Allison 2005:47). This Jewish mystical movement appeared in the late Hellenistic period, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. It teaches both of the possibility of making a sublime journey to God and of the ability of human beings to draw down divine powers to earth.

Rabbinic literature

In rabbinism there was great restraint to the ecstatic vision of God. Nevertheless, many statements refer to some kind of vision, as to see the face of *Shekina*, a divine presence but not God himself. The vision of God as such is eschatological. In the intermediate state, the righteous will only see the face of *Shekina* whilst the ungodly will be excluded. Only after the resurrection the righteous will have the privilege to have a real vision of God (Michaelis 1967:340). Rabbinic literature often interprets the 'image of God' (Gn 1:26–27) in literal terms (Goshen-Gottstein 1994:171–195). Philo (*Vita Mosis* 1.158) argues that God was invisible, but it did not entail that God lacked a body but rather that God was hidden from view; invisibility was simply a 'matter of tactics' for the biblical God (Cherbonnier 1962:199). Some of the rabbinic literature interpreted such references to God to believe in a corporeal Deity. Early Christian ideas probably depended on similar rabbinic traditions (Aaron 1997:299–314).

Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature

Apocalyptic literature (e.g. Rv 1:1 and 4:1) often reported about visions of God (Rowland 1970:137–154). Accordingly, only certain angels⁸ and a few people⁹ were privileged to see

8. Even the seraphs hid their faces from the Lord (Is 6:2).

9. For example, Moses, with whom God spoke face to face and who could see the form of the Lord (Nm 12:8).

God already, an experience which awaited most believers only in the afterlife. In Tobit 12:15, Raphael declares: 'I am ... one of the seven holy angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord.' Matthew 18:10 has a similar reference to angels who may enter before the glory of God: 'See that you do not look down on one of the little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven see the face of my Father (λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτῶν ἐν οὐρανοῖς διὰ παντὸς βλέπουσι τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς).' In apocalyptic literature, the 'angels of the face' refer to a specific category of heavenly beings that can meet God face to face. Similarly, the promise in Matthew 5:8 has been interpreted in such a literal way. The vision which the 'angels of the face' already enjoy, will also be shared by the righteous in the life to come, as they will become 'like the angels in heaven (ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ)' (Mt 22:30). Christian literature often interpreted Matthew 5:8 in relation to Matthew 22:30, according to which the eschatological vision of God is similar to the vision these angels experience even now and the intellect of the redeemed would become like the angels' intellect (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortationes* 11; Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones* 3.30; Augustine, *Epistulae* 137.37 and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1).

New Testament

John expresses 'seeing God' in metaphorical terms: 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (Jn 1:18). Here, John regards the vision of God as knowledge of God. The full sight of God is stated in eschatological terms. John the elder writes: 'We know that when He appears, we shall see Him as He is' (1 Jn 3:2) and 'They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads' (Rv 22:4). Paul argues along similar lines:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor 13:12)

The remark of the author of Hebrews is closely related to the sixth beatitude: 'without holiness no-one will see God' (Heb 12:14). The vision mentioned in Hebrews most probably should also be read eschatologically, though not necessarily (as is the case with this particular beatitude).

The common urge of all these New Testament references is that a holy life is required to experience the privilege of seeing God.

Extra-biblical Hellenistic material

The Greeks had many words for seeing, covering a wide range of meaning. This indicates that the Greeks had a high estimation for seeing. The Hellenes enjoyed in high measure the gift of seeing and contemplating. They were a people of the eye, with a fine sense for what was seen in different forms and at different spiritual levels. Seeing therefore had a very strong religious significance in the Greek world (Michaelis 1967:319). Verbs of seeing underwent a transition from sensual to intellectual perception. What was perceived by the eye had to be interpreted by the νοῦς [mind]. Seeing implied sense-perception and participation in events.

The possibility to see the divine or a deity was implied in Greek mythology. Gods were described in anthropomorphic terms but only revealed themselves to a few elect persons. However, some philosophers emphasised that gods cannot be perceived by the senses as such. Plato's teaching of 'ideas' expressed an antithesis between the world of sense-perception and that of the spiritual world. Plato argued that the instrument of seeing the divine was the 'eye of the soul' (τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμμα, *Responsoria* VII, 533d). Seeing the divine played an important role in the mysteries. In the Isis rites, the ideas of seeing and worshipping were closely related. Initiates enjoyed divine visions and ecstatic experiences (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI, 23). In Hellenistic Gnosticism it was believed that when a man was transformed into divine nature, he could see God. Such change had to be brought about by the γνώσις [knowledge]. It was emphasised that God is not accessible by the senses. One had to be liberated from the world of senses and be subjected to the νοῦς [mind] and ψυχήν [soul], which made him a new creature (Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* VII, 30, 3). In the magic papyri, many practices were recorded to force gods and demons to manifest themselves and to be subjected to human control. Prayers were uttered to direct personal vision (*Papyri Graecae magicae* V, 54).

The combination of purity with visions of gods also appeared in Greek literature (Betz 1995:135). Purity of the soul was an important concern for the Pythagoreans, Aristotelians and Platonians. In the Philosophy of Aristotle and Plato¹⁰ the true sense of being is realised in seeing God (Luz 1990:240). Purity of the soul was connected with the entering into the Elysian Fields or the Isles of the blessed. The Greek environment also linked purity of the soul with the vision of gods. In the Myth of Thespesius told by Plutarch, which is based on Orphic-Pythagorean afterlife mythology, the soul of Thespesius came to the highest and most sacred part of heaven in his flight into the afterlife. He desired to see the divine light, but it was too bright for him to look into. The reason was that his soul was not pure enough for such vision (*De sera numinis vindicta* 566E). According to the Greeks, some famous philosophers did achieve purity of the soul. It was believed that Socrates passed directly into the Isles of the blessed (Plutarch, *De genio Socratis* 20, 558D).

The Hellenistic Gnostic document *Corpus Hermeticum* (end of the 3rd century AD) explains 'seeing God' as an eschatological hope:

It is not possible for a soul to be deified while it yet remains in a human body but it is necessary that it be changed and then it will behold the beauty of the gods and thus become deified. (*Corpus Hermeticum* 10.6)

When considering the co-text of Matthew 5:8, it becomes clear that the concept of seeing God did not sprout in a vacuum. Ideas of the vision of God evolved in Jewish and Graeco-Roman writings. In turn, Matthew 5:8 gave rise to new traditions that developed from its interpretation.

¹⁰ Passages such as Plato's *Republica* 7.527D-E, 533D (about the eye of the soul), Plato's *Symposium* 211D-E and Aristotle's *Ethica* 7.15 are fundamental in this regard.

Conclusion

We must be grateful that a text usually provides some stability of meaning through the ages. However, this historical overview of the concept of *visio Dei* demonstrates how the context of the reader does influence the interpretation of a text. This proves the naivety of some scholars to assume that if we could only apply scientific methods of interpretation correctly, we would be able to identify the single, stable and precisely retrievable true meaning of a text beyond any doubt. Others would argue that the correct view of Scripture would automatically guarantee similar results. Clearly we should be more sophisticated in our approach and more modest with research results. We should be aware to what extent current dogmatic concerns could govern how we interpret the biblical text.

The meaning of a text cannot be understood in isolation because each text has pre-history, contemporary history and post-history. The survey of Jewish, Graeco-Roman and Christian materials in this article proved this with regard to the concept of *visio Dei* in Matthew 5:8. The full meaning of this concept should be sought in the different ideas that led to the creation of this text and the ideas that developed from it. All of this supplies us with different answers which, themselves, could lead to a variety of possible interpretations.

This investigation also proved how readings have changed when readers have changed. Ideological or theological views undeniably played a role in how seeing God was conceptualised. This could range from the idea of a corporeal deity, which would lead to the physical vision of God, or because the Church accepted Jesus to be the second person in the Trinity, that seeing would refer to seeing Jesus, or, rather, the concept of a mystical experience coming from a mystical background, et cetera. On the other hand, the variety of interpretation does not necessarily exclude other possibilities. Seeing God can simultaneously be understood as the eschatological encounter with God in Jesus Christ, or as the experience of God in this life, be it in a religious gathering, in the humbleness of the poor, or in the renewal of creation.

Ongoing interpretation opens our eyes to the fascinating world of fuller understanding and multiple meanings which need not always have to exclude one another.

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