

VETERA CHRISTIANORVM

anno 54 - 2017



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“Through a glass, darkly” (ICor 13,12) in Paul’s literary imagination

*Nulla mihi certa est
nulla est peregrina figura*
(Simposius, *Aenigmata* 69)

Out of all the symbolic, metaphorical and literary images implied or directly attested in the early Christian writings, the vision in the enigmatic mirror depicted by Paul in ICor 13,12 remains one of the strongest and most vivid sources of inspiration, as its many quotations, allusions and elaborations from every period and in every field of literature stand to demonstrate up to this day¹. Another powerful metaphor of the mirrored image can be found in IICor 3,18; however, this second passage has not benefitted from the same literary fortune, although it is possibly more substantial an image than the previous one, at least from a theological point of view².

Despite the evident mutual reference of the two passages, they have not always been viewed as connected; in secondary literature, it is not unusual to find discussions of ICor 13,12, even fairly lengthy ones, in which no mention of IICor 3,18 is made

¹ Besides the specific literature quoted below, see the classic discussions in J. Behm, *Das Bildwort vom Spiegel I. Korinther 13,12*, in W. Koepf (ed.), *Zur Theorie des Christentums. Festschrift R. Seeberg*, I, Leipzig 1929, 315-342; N. Hugedé, *La métaphore du miroir dans les Épîtres de saint Paul aux Corinthiens*, Neuchâtel-Paris 1957; G. Kittel, ἀίνγμα (ἔσοπτρον), in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I, Grand Rapids 1964, 178-180; J. Houghton, *A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13*, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153, 1996, 344-356; H.W. Hollander, *Seeing God “in a Riddle” or “Face to Face”: An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 13.12*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32, 2010, 395-404; M.M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, Cambridge 2010, 58-78. For some echoes in modern literature, see E. Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature*, Cambridge 2006, 200-206.

² For instance, in recent years, IICor 3,18 has received an interesting reinterpretation in the framework of the deification of the believer in ancient religions, early Christianity included: cfr. M.D. Litwa, *Transformation through a Mirror: Moses in 2 Cor. 3.18*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34, 2012, 286-297; Id., *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology*, Berlin 2012. A detailed discussion on the exegesis of this verse can be found in J.M.F. Heath, *Paul’s Visual Piety: The Metamorphosis of the Beholder*, Oxford 2013, 215-225.

at all – possibly because this latter passage lacks any real mention of mirrors (whereas ἔσοπτρον explicitly appears in ICor 13,12), and only the dynamics of reflection (κατοπτρίζω, “to reflect, to mirror”, and so on) can be found. This article aims to carry out a survey of both texts in order to highlight their consistency and reciprocal dependence: IICor 3,18 can be said to complete the apparently obscure, metaphorical image of the mirror employed by Paul in ICor 13,12.

1. ἔσοπτρον

The text of ICor 13,12 is well known:

βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἔσοπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθη

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (ICor 13,12: NRSV)³.

The rich and varied exegetical story of ICor 13,12 exhaustively confirms that, as happens in similar circumstances, the reception of the original image found in a given text can often move very far from its starting point, taking on new and sometimes unexpected shapes and developments, as well as new meanings that probably never came to author's mind. The reason for the exceptionally broad use of the “dark mirror” in literature, as well as its multiple transformations and adaptations, however, lies primarily in the obscure formulation of the original verse itself. On the other hand, these words are inserted into a chapter that is not homogeneous with the rest of *First Corinthians*: this chapter represents an apparently autonomous composition, which has been accurately defined as a “rhetorical encomium of love”⁴.

On various occasions, it has been observed that this “encomium” was composed by merging two different thematic units: the first based on an actual praise of love

³ If not otherwise stated, translations from NT literature are presented here according to the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version, 1989). For ICor 13,12, it must be pointed out that, at least in English-speaking countries, the core of the verse is certainly not known as “In a mirror, dimly” (as in NRSV), but as “Through a glass, darkly”, according to the KJV (King James Version: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”). The reason why the popularity of the KJV version (1611) – which originates in the Geneva Bible (1560) – has surpassed that of any other translation of this verse was well expressed by E.P. Nolan, *Now Through a Glass Darkly: Specular Images of Being and Knowing from Virgil to Chaucer*, Ann Arbor 1990, 1: “for its beauty, some argue, and, as other argue, because it protects, even as it illuminates, a central mystery”. On the origins of these English translations, see also, more recently: C. Gruenler, “*A Dark Speakyng*”: *English Translations of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and What We Can See in Them*, (2012) *Faculty Presentations*. Paper 169. https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/faculty_presentations/169.

⁴ J.A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New Haven-London 2008, 487.

(vv. 1-8a, further divisible into 1-3 and 4-7 or 4-8a)⁵, the second (vv. 7/8b-13) dealing with the transience and imperfection of things beyond which only qualities such as faith, hope and love (πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη) appear as immutable⁶. Verse 12 falls within the last section, in the context of considerations on transience and the limitation of human perception and experience.

In these verses, it is not evident whether Paul’s perspective on transcending this condition of limitation is linked to the ἔσχατον, or is instead a short-term change, connected with an inner transformation obtained through the acquisition of faith. What is clear, however, are the differences, as well as the similarities, between two very different moments: the first, set in the present, when we can only see ourselves “in part” (ἐκ μέρους, vv. 9, 10, 12); and the second, in the future, when we can see “face to face” (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον, v. 12), and it is possible to “know fully” –or, rather, when a full “recognition” (ἐπιγινώσκω, *ibid.*) is possible, with respect to either ourselves, or the truth, through a clear vision of things.

In several respects, it would seem that the achievement of such a clear vision could be obtained only beyond life, *i.e.*, through completion in the ἔσχατον. This view finds some support in the literature: the same kind of process particularly seems to be hinted at in *Job* 19,26-27 (though the similarity with ICOR 13,12, however, is more pronounced in the Masoretic Text than in the Septuagint)⁷. The situation seems hard to define, and it cannot be ruled out that both possibilities, the ἔσχατον and present time, were present in the author’s mind. The contrast between ‘now’ (ἄρτι) and ‘then’ (τότε), in any case, is clearly stated in v. 12, which in turn is divided into two, showing a distinct parallelism (a-c, b-d) between its first and second part:

[12a]

βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’
ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι

For now we see through
a mirror (as) in a riddle

[12b]

τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς
πρόσωπον

then (I/we shall see) face
to face

⁵ Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* cit., 488.

⁶ For other divisions of these two or three units, see for instance H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians. A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Philadelphia 1975, 218, mainly considering rhetorical and metrical evidence.

⁷ “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (NRSV). As the usual, the Greek *Job* does not match with other versions, TM included: ἀναστήσαι τὸ δέρμα μου τὸ ἀνατλῶν ταῦτα παρὰ γὰρ κυρίου ταῦτά μοι συνετελέεσθη ἃ ἐγὼ ἐμαντῶ συνεπίσταμαι ἃ ὁ ὀφθαλμός μου ἐώρακεν καὶ οὐκ ἄλλος; see the translation in A. Pietersma, B.G. Wright (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under that Title*, New York-Oxford 2007 (NETS): “May my skin, which patiently endures these things, rise up; for these things have been accomplished on me by the Lord – things I am conscious of in myself, things my eye has seen and no other, and all of them have come to an end for me in my bosom”.

[12c]

ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους

Now I know in part

[12d]

τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς
καὶ ἐπεγνώσθηνthen I will know fully, as I
am recognized

Within this progression from ἄρτι to τότε, “to see in a mirror, dimly” (12a; NRSV; “through a glass, darkly” in KJV), is equivalent to “to know in part” (12c); “to see face to face” (12b) finds its equivalence in “to know fully” (12d). The dynamics of this parallelism is plain enough, for it simply compares, based on two different sightings, a partial or rough vision, and a full, direct or complete state of knowledge or wisdom.

On the other hand, the same metaphorical image of seeing “through a mirror” (δι’ ἐσόπτρου) as used by Paul has remained, despite various interpretations, at least as obscure as the mirrored image itself. How is it possible to receive a partial, vague and moreover ambiguous (ἐν αἰνίγματι) image of reality, contrasting with a direct image, received “face to face” (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον), and yielding full knowledge of something⁸? Are we to assume here two kinds of “mirrors” – like in the rabbinical exegesis of some of Paul’s possible biblical sources (on which see below); or does it suggest the fall of a barrier between the first and the second kind of sight?

There is nothing new in stating that, despite its concision, the verse raises many problematic issues, both lexical and exegetical. As for the literal interpretation, a look at ancient and modern translations of ICor 13,12 immediately shows that the translation of ἔσοπτρον as ‘mirror’ has never been automatic or taken for granted, though in classical lexicography the word εἴσοπτρον – its original form – is the most common one used to indicate the metallic mirror, by far the most widespread type of mirror circulating in antiquity⁹.

As for the biblical lexicon – where the regular form εἴσοπτρον is unknown – in the NT there is just one other occurrence of ἔσοπτρον, in *James* 1,23: here, the man who listens but does not put the word into practice is compared to someone who watches himself in a mirror, not going beyond the surface of what he sees (ὅτι εἷ τις ἀκροατῆς λόγου ἐστὶν καὶ οὐ ποιητῆς, οὗτος ἔοικεν ἀνδρὶ κατανοοῦντι τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ). In the OT there are two mentions of ἔσοπτρον

⁸ On the impossibility of physical nature attaining the knowledge of the divine, see the early considerations of Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cant. Hom.* 3, 86 (at the end; transl. in R.A. Norris ed., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Atlanta 2012, 96-97). A bit later, Augustine made a large use of ICor 13,12 frequently discussing the difference between human and spiritual vision of God, particularly in his *De doctrina christiana* and *De videndo Deo*, but also elsewhere: see M. Miles, *Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine’s De Trinitate and Confessions*, *Journal of Religion* 63, 1983, 125-142; B. Hughes, “*We See Through a Glass Darkly*”: *Augustine’s Historical Thought and the Vision of God* (2002), online at: http://works.bepress.com/barnaby_hughes/1/.

⁹ H.G. Liddell, R. Scott *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford-New York 1996⁹, 496 (εἴσοπτρον).

in the *Hagiographa*, both in books not included in the Jewish canon, and both in a sapiential context (thus confirming the popularity of the mirror metaphor in wisdom literature). The first is in Sir 12,11, an admonition not to trust the impious, whose influence is like the rust on a mirror (καὶ ἔση αὐτῷ ὡς ἐκμεμαχῶς ἔσοπτρον καὶ γνώση ὅτι οὐκ εἰς τέλος κατίωσεν); the second is in Sap 7,26, where Wisdom is depicted as a mirror of God’s power (ἔσοπτρον ἀκηλίδωτον τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνεργείας). Of these four occurrences, it seems that only Iac 1,23 could be of some utility in the exegesis of ICor 13,12, but the comparison is limited to the relationship between passive and active knowledge: that is, in the context of James’s epistle, concerning the dynamics of putting the revelation into practice¹⁰.

2. Mirrors and windows

It has often been remarked that in ICor 13,12, the peculiar use of the preposition *διά* constructed with the genitive should yield the translation ‘through’, which is indeed the most common choice (although it would also be possible to translate it as ‘by’, ‘with’ or ‘in’). Among the various derivatives of *ὁράω* (‘to look/see’) that refer to the mirror – or to any item with a reflective surface, fit to be used as a mirror – *ἔσοπτρον* (in papyri often *ὄσοπτρον*)¹¹ doesn’t actually bear the sense of ‘seeing through’, at least not etymologically – which would normally be expressed by *δίοπτρον* – but, instead, of ‘seeing into’ something (as *ἔνοπτρον* would mean ‘to see in’ something, and *κάτοπτρον*, ‘to see downwards’). Therefore, “through a mirror” would appear to be an appropriate translation for *δι’ ἐσόπτρου*, even though the sight evidently does not pass ‘through’ a mirror in the same way that one passes ‘through’ a city. This explains why various interpreters preferred not to translate it literally as “through a mirror”, but “through a glass”, using ‘glass’ in its secondary meaning of ‘window’, and sometimes straight forwardly using ‘window’. In terms of translation, the process is not incorrect, but it is self-evident that this interpretative choice leads the reader elsewhere, replacing the original image with another term that raises further doubts as to its interpretation¹².

It must be also admitted that such problems are quite implicit in the verse itself, because in 12a it is by no means clear whether the action denoted in the verse is to that of looking at ourselves, or at someone (or something) beyond ourselves. The possible,

¹⁰ D.J. Moo, *The Epistle of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Grand Rapids-Cambridge 1985, 82-85.

¹¹ C. Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire*, Fribourg-Göttingen 1978, 292-295; A.L. Connolly, ‘ἔσοπτρον’, in G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, 4. *A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1979*, Macquarie 1987, 149-150.

¹² An interesting attempt to reconcile both the interpretations ‘mirror’ and ‘window’ can be found early enough in commentaries: see A.P. Stanley, *The Epistles of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., London 1858, 244: “The expression, ‘through (*διὰ*) a mirror’, may arise from the illusion that what is seen in the mirror seems to be behind it, and so seen through it”.

but quite uncertain metaphorical pattern seen in *Job* 19,26 above would suggest the first interpretation and, in this light, being “face to face” with something/someone in v. 12b would mean that the subject is almost in contact with God, as happens to Job when he hopes to be deprived of his temporary, earthly skin¹³. If this interpretation is correct, it would not be inappropriate to translate ἔσοπτρον as ‘glass’ (see the KJV) or even as ‘window’. On the other hand, however, in order to make a correct choice we would need to know exactly what we are to see, and thus talking about. If we are dealing with our own image, it would be correct to translate “in/through a mirror”; if we are looking at something or someone else, we would prefer “through a glass/window”¹⁴.

It is perhaps for this reason that the quest for a specific, univocal meaning for δι’ ἐσόπτρου in ICor 13,12 has carried on for centuries, changing from translation to translation. And when, in the exegetical process, the tools of philology and lexicography have appeared not conclusive enough, recourse has often been made to material relics of the past, *i.e.*, to archaeology. After all, metaphors, parables and similitudes easily make use of *realia*, and illustrations or tentative explanations of biblical motifs or puzzling terms on the basis of epigraphical and archaeological materials is a frequent and still current tactic in both didactics and practical exegesis¹⁵. So it is not surprising to find a number of erudite archaeological comments about the Pauline mirror as well, including comments on shape, use and production places of ancient bronze mirrors¹⁶,

¹³ J. Doukhan, *Radioscopy of a Resurrection: The Meaning of niqq^opūzō^t in Job 19,26*, Andrews University Seminary Studies 34, 1996, 187-193; A. Pinker, *A New Interpretation of Job 19,26*, Journal of Hebrew Scriptures 15, 2015 (online).

¹⁴ The translation of ἔσοπτρον in ICor 13,12 as ‘window’ is apparently an extension of the same exegesis, of unknown origin, which made it possible to translate ἔσοπτρον as ‘glass’. In 19th century English commentaries, the translation ‘glass’ frequently appears as an object of criticism, but it also appears that ‘window’ started achieving use in the same sentence. See F.W. Robertson, *Expository Lectures on St. Paul’s Epistles to the Corinthians*, London 1859, 218.

¹⁵ Among the many sources connecting early Christian writings and material culture, E.M. Meyers, J.F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity. The Social and Historical Setting of Palestinian Judaism and Christianity*, Nashville 1981; J.L. Reed, *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians*, New York 2007; J.B. Green, L.M. McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, Grand Rapids 2013. Besides this literature, in past decades there was also a debate – which now seems to have slowed down – on the usefulness and limits of *realia* in biblical interpretation: see W.G. Dever, *Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology*, in D.A. Knight, G. Tucker (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, Minneapolis-Atlanta 1985; C. Meyers, E. Meyers, *Expanding the Frontiers of Biblical Archaeology*, Eretz-Israel 20, 1989, 140-147 (English section); S. Friesen, *Revelation, Realia, and Religion. Archaeology in the Interpretation of the Apocalypse*, Harvard Theological Review 88, 1995, 291-314. In more recent years, much data collected for the New Testament and early Christian literature were merged with research on the historical Jesus. On the other hand, new fields of interest and interaction with other disciplines, such as economics, have arisen: see P. Oakes, *Methodological Issues in Using Economic Evidence in Interpretation of Early Christian Texts*, in B.W. Longenecker, K.D. Liebengood (eds.), *Engaging Economics. New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, Grand Rapids 2009, 9-34.

¹⁶ While it is impossible to give even a short account of all the commentaries here, I will make reference to just a few examples. For ἔσοπτρον as ‘mirror’, see for instance M.F. Sadler, *The First and*

as well as its possible (but unlikely) link with divinatory¹⁷ and prophetic practices¹⁸. Less common are references to Roman *lapis specularis*: the mineral stone usually consists of a mica slab – *’ispaqlaryā* in Judeo-Aramaic – whose transparency ranges from total opaqueness to a nearly absolute clearness, which was the preferred material for window panes in antiquity, glass panes being more expensive¹⁹.

To sum it up, saying δι’ ἑσόπτρου is highly ambiguous *per se*, lacking the context of any explicit information about the object, which is at first seen in some faulty way (“in part”), and only later – after some undefined event – recognized very clearly. Only the ending of the verse seems to imply the viewer’s full knowledge of himself²⁰. Despite the fact that the dynamics of seeing indicated in ICor 13,12 and illustrated above points to a sighting through a window pane (*i.e.*, an *’ispaqlaryā*), the contents of the verse seems to imply the knowledge – and then the vision – of the viewer himself. One could speculate that Paul had the term *’ispaqlaryā* in mind while writing to the inhabitants of Corinth, mostly Latin-speaking as it seems, who would have used *speculum* to indicate a mirror: in any case, however, his knowledge of Greek led him to correctly use ἑσόπτρον²¹.

3. ἐν αἰνίγματι

According to ICor 13,12, a transformation is needed in the viewer, not in the mirror, to receive a full and clear image in the reflecting medium. Even in the best of

Second Epistles to the Corinthians, London 1889, 227: “[...] it would be a mirror of highly polished brass or other metal, for making which the Corinthians were famous”. The reference to the renowned Corinthian brass applies to the high percentage of tin used in producing the local brass, on which see V.P. Furnish, *Corinth in Paul’s Time – What Can Archaeology Tell Us?*, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14/3, May/June 1988, 14-27. Josephus highly praises the appearance of a gate covered with Corinthian brass in the Temple of Jerusalem (*Bell.* 5, 201-205).

¹⁷ On the classical connection between Pauline texts and catoptromancy, see R. Reitzenstein, *Historia Monachorum und Historia Lausiaca. Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Mönchtums und der frühchristlichen Begriffe Gnostiker und Pneumatiker*, Göttingen 1916, 242-255; H. Achelis, *Katoptromantie bei Paulus*, in H. Achelis et al. (eds.), *Theologische Festschrift für G. N. Bonwetsch. Zu seinem siebenzigsten Geburtstage*, Leipzig 1918, 56-63, both largely confuted in subsequent years.

¹⁸ I. Gruenwald, *The מראה and the Technique of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Vision*, Tarbiz 40, 1970, 95-97 (Hebrew); Litwa, *Transformation* cit. 291.

¹⁹ C. Tempesta, *Quod vitri more translucet. Il lapis specularis nella testimonianza delle fonti*, in C. Guarnieri (ed.), *Il vetro di pietra. Il lapis specularis nel mondo romano dall’estrazione all’uso*, Faenza 2015, 45-55 (including a reference to the *’ispaqlaryā ha-me’irah* of the Talmudic passage mentioned below, which the author links to a dim shining slab (“pietra speculare brillante”), while other sources indicate transparency.

²⁰ τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθη, “then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known”. This could mean “I will see myself as the others see me”, but this simplistic interpretation seems hard to explain.

²¹ On Paul’s language skills and Latin in Corinth, see S.E. Porter, *Did Paul Speak Latin?*, in S.E. Porter (ed.), *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, Leiden-Boston 2008, 289-308; J.M. Ogereau, *Paul’s Koinonia with the Philippians. A Socio-Historical Investigation of a Pauline Economic Partnership*, Tübingen 2014, 101-104.

mirrors, the reflected image is just an overturning of reality: very close to reality, as to the viewer as well, but at the same time separated by him and hidden behind the glass or the polished surface. It is both there at hand and not immediately reachable, like the answer to a riddle. Considerations like these could have led Paul to the apparently unusual use of ἐν αἰνίγματι in v. 12a to indicate the characteristics of an image that cannot be seen clearly.

As already observed, the translation of ἐν αἰνίγματι with adverbs such as ‘darkly’, ‘confusedly’, ‘obscurely’, ‘dimly’, though incisive from a literary point of view, does not adequately address the meaning of a term that is after all as specific as αἶνιγμα. It is used various times in the Septuagint for Hebrew *hiddâ* (‘enigma, riddle’), and once for *šammâ* (‘object of wonder, amazement’)²². In the framework of ICor 13, it is not lacking the theme of the mystery connected with the prophetic experience; rather, this can be considered central to its meaning. Therefore, the insertion of an expression such as ἐν αἰνίγματι seems meaningful to an effort to indicate the inadequacy of common perception when a condition of moral or spiritual perfection is lacking:

καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν ... ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθὲν εἶμι

And if I have prophetic powers ... but do not have love, I am nothing
(ICor 13,2)

εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end
(ICor 13,8a)

In this context, 13,9 is of special interest, as it contains a reference to “know in part” (ἐκ μέρους) that we shall find again in 13,12:

ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part
(ICor 13,9)

Seen in context, and from this perspective, a vision ἐν αἰνίγματι can hardly be other than a direct reference to Nm 12,6-8, a reading that clarifies the meaning of ἐν αἰνίγματι in ICor 13,12. In this passage from *Numbers*, Aaron and Miriam learn directly from YHWH that while prophets always encounter God in indirect ways, by means of vision (ἐν ὄραματι, Nm 12,6) or in a state of sleep (ἐν ὕπνῳ, *ibid.*), Moses

²² The word αἶνιγμα is used for *hiddâ/hiddôt* in Nm 12,8; I(III)Rg 10,1; IICr 9,1; Prv 1,6; Dn 8,23; *šammâ* in Dt 28,37. See T. Muraoka, *A Greek-Hebrew/Aramaic Two-Way Index to the Septuagint*, Louvain *et al.* 2010, 5.

received the divine revelation “face to face” (literally, “mouth to mouth”)²³. God talked to him “clearly, not in riddles” (ἐν εἶδει καὶ οὐ δι’ αἰνιγμάτων; Nm 12,8), and he was allowed no less than to behold the divine image²⁴.

καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς ἀκούσατε τῶν λόγων μου ἐὰν γένηται προφήτης ὑμῶν κυρίῳ ἐν ὀράματι αὐτῷ γνωσθήσομαι καὶ ἐν ὕπνῳ λαλήσω αὐτῷ οὐχ οὕτως ὁ θεράπων μου Μωυσῆς ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ μου πιστός ἐστιν **στόμα κατὰ στόμα λαλήσω αὐτῷ ἐν εἶδει καὶ οὐ δι’ αἰνιγμάτων καὶ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου εἶδεν** καὶ διὰ τί οὐκ ἐφοβήθητε καταλαλήσαι κατὰ τοῦ θεράποντός μου Μωυσῆ

And he said to them, “Hear my words:
If there is a prophet of you for the Lord,
in a vision I will be known to him,
and in sleep I will speak to him.
Not so my attendant Moyses;
in my whole house he is faithful.
**Mouth to mouth I will speak to him,
in visible form and not through riddles.
And he has seen the glory of the Lord.**
And why were you not afraid to speak
against my attendant Moyses?” (Nm 12,6-8).

In LXX Nm 12, δι’ αἰνιγμάτων (lit. ‘through riddles’, corresponding to MT נִתְיַהַב *ve-hidoṭ*), is contrasted with ἐν εἶδει, εἶδος literally meaning ‘external shape, image, appearance’ (as in MT מַרְעָה *mar’eh*). The antithesis expressed by *hiddâ* and *mar’eh* in MT is then transferred in Septuagint Greek in αἰνιγμα and εἶδος. Since, in ICor, Paul apparently makes a direct reference to the same kind of experience hinted at in Nm 12,8, it follows that ἐν αἰνιγματι in ICor 13,12 indicates the opposite of what can directly be met with or experienced as sound (hearing) or vision. In this light, the translation of ἐν αἰνιγματι as ‘obscurely, darkly’ is by no means wrong, although at this stage it can be said that ἐν αἰνιγματι here probably just seems to be a complicated way to simply express ‘indirectly’. Devoid of literalisms and semitisms, ICor 13,12a could just mean:

For now we see as in a mirror, indirectly; but then (we will see) directly.

Furthermore, the evident link between ICor 13,12 and Nm 12,6-8²⁵ permits us to recall the stimulating rabbinical exegesis of Is 6,2 as offered in the Babylonian

²³ Indeed, the original Septuagint text is literal here and maintains the Semitic expression στόμα κατὰ στόμα, “mouth to mouth” (as in MT פֶּה לְפֶה , *peh el-peh*).

²⁴ It must be noted that the Septuagint here diverges from the MT, adopting the unambiguous Hebrew term מְמוּנָה (*mûnâ*: ‘figure, image’), which is rendered as δόξα (‘honor, splendor, glory’; instead of μορφή or another εἶδος, used a few words earlier). The use of δόξα for the image (or, better, the appearance or likeness) of God is adopted by Paul himself in ICor 11,7: he is the man εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων.

²⁵ Inexplicably minimized in Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* cit. 227.

Talmud, tractate *Yevamoṭ*, f. 49b, where it is used as a model directly inspired by Nm 12:

וַאֲרָאָה אֶת ה' כְּדַתְנִיָּא כֹל הַנְּבִיאִים נִסְתַּכְלוּ בְּאַסְפַּקְלָרִיא שְׂאִינָה מְאִירָה מְשֶׁה רַבִּינוּ נִסְתַּכַּל בְּאַסְפַּקְלָרִיא
הַמְאִירָה

“I saw the Lord” [Is 6,2]. (This is to be understood) as it has been said: all the prophets looked into a dim glass, but Moses looked through a clear glass (TB *Yevamoṭ*, 49b).

What is interesting for us is that the connection with Moses, who saw God in a direct way in this old Jewish exegesis – not attributed to any particular sage – is enriched by a metaphor implying a view through an opaque or transparent panel: the *'ispaqlaryā* (אִסְפַּקְלָרִיא) mentioned above, often – though improperly – translated as ‘glass’²⁶. It being inconceivable that Isaiah actually saw God, and Moses as well – though the biblical text says otherwise – the principle of a ‘double glass’ was introduced: both Isaiah and Moses saw God through some kind of reflection, indirectly, though in two different ways: the former through a dim ‘glass’ (*be- 'ispaqlaryā še- 'eynah me 'irah*, literally “through a glass which is not clear/illuminated”), the other through a clear one (*be- 'ispaqlaryā ha-me 'irah*, lit. “through the clear/illuminated glass”)²⁷. Hebrew *me 'irah*, literally ‘clear, illuminated’, can also be translated ‘shining’ (and, on the contrary, *'ispaqlaryā še- 'eynah me 'irah* can be a ‘glass without shininess’: *i.e.*, ‘obscure, dark’); however, the meaning of *me 'irah* here seems to be just ‘transparent’²⁸. As it is impossible to discuss rabbinic documentation on this here, as this would lead us on quite a different exegetical path, we shall limit ourselves to noting two possibilities: the first, that the metaphor used by Paul entered into rabbinical circles in some way (which seems unlikely); the second, that both contexts originate from a metaphor circulating in Jewish milieus, originally concerning the experience of prophetic vision, which accidentally emerged in NT material earlier than in rabbinical literature²⁹.

²⁶ On the meaning of *'ispaqlaryā* and its variants – a term directly or indirectly derived from Latin *specularia* – in rabbinical literature, see M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, New York 1903, 1017; S. Safrai, *On the 'aspeqlarya and its Use in Mishnaic Times*, Yediot 31, 1966, 231-235 (Hebrew).

²⁷ It should be considered that the Hebrew preposition *be-* stands for both the locative ‘in’ or ‘through’ as well for the instrumental ‘by means of’.

²⁸ Not to mention, at least here, the wordplay found in the variation מְאִירָה/מְרָאָה, *me 'irah/mar 'eh* (‘mirror’): M. Fishbane, *Through the Looking-Glass: Reflections on Ezek. 43.4, Num. 12.8 and 1 Cor. 13.8*, Hebrew Annual Review 10, 1986, 63-75.

²⁹ In the Jewish world, concerns about those biblical passages declaring a direct vision of the divine image must have emerged quite early. Specific doubts on Isaiah’s vision can be detected in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (3,8-9), a work on the border between Judaism and Christianity; see also M. Henze, *King Manasseh of Judah in Early Judaism and Christianity*, in G.J. Brooke, A. Feldman (eds.), *On Prophets, Warriors, and Kings. Former Prophets Through the Eyes of Their Interpreters*, Berlin 2016, 183-229: 217. For the penetration of 1 Cor 13,12 in the current exegesis of late Jewish mystical texts, see D.C. Matt (ed.), *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, IV, Stanford 2007, on the parašah *Yitro* 2, 82a.

4. *Seeing what?*

As hinted above, a crucial point of ICor 13,12 is the object of vision (βλέπω), which is not specified by Paul, thus making possible various speculations. There are, however, no more than two concrete possibilities. In the first instance, ignoring the fact that a mirror is usually used to see one’s own face, it is possible to think – as many believed in antiquity – that the object of vision lies somewhere beyond the mirror, if not on its other side, and when the mirror is taken away, or becomes clear and transparent, this object can be seen directly, *πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον*. You could even find yourself facing your own image, not necessarily something or someone else. A different level, or quality, of vision is meant here: at first you just see (βλέπω), then you know (γινώσκω). But we should discard God’s vision. As seen above, the divine vision declared in some passages of the OT has been denied in rabbinical exegesis, and the Pharisee Paul, while mentioning his ecstatic journey to the Third Heaven (IICor 12,1-4), doesn’t say at all that he ‘saw’ something, just that he ‘heard’ something³⁰. Furthermore, ITim 6,16 (even though not of Pauline authorship) clearly rules out any possible visual contact with God, “whom no human being has seen or is able to see” (ὄν εἶδεν οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ ἰδεῖν δύναται).

Having considered all these instances, we must accept that just the image of the viewer – before and after his somatic transformation due to his spiritual conversion – is seen in the mirror. This solves the problem presented at the beginning of this paper: we are dealing with a transformation in the present time, not in the *ἔσχατον*, as the texts and secondary sources show. The face of the converted again reflects God’s image – his ‘glory’ – permitting him to recognize a new, full image of himself. So finally we come to the relevance of IICor 3,18, mentioned above, as a key to this exegesis of ICor 13. It lies, in turn, in the connection between IICor 3,13-18 and Nm 12,6-8, in a chain connecting the Pauline transformed believer with the model provided by the figure of Moses transformed after the Sinai revelation. The *2 Corinthians* passage is now worth quoting in full here:

καὶ οὐ καθάπερ Μωϋσῆς ἐτίθει κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἀτενίσαι τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὸ τέλος τοῦ καταργουμένου. ἀλλὰ ἐπαρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν. ἄχρι γὰρ τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τῇ ἀναγνώσει τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης μένει, μὴ ἀνακαλυπτόμενον ὅτι ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται· ἀλλ’ ἕως σήμερον ἡνίκα ἂν ἀναγνώσκηται Μωϋσῆς, κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν αὐτῶν κεῖται· **ἡνίκα δὲ ἂν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον, περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα.** [...] **ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακακαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτριζόμενοι τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος.**

³⁰ καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα (“and he heard things that are not to be told”). P. Schäfer, *New Testament and Hekhalot Literature. The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism*, Journal of Jewish Studies 35, 1984, 19-35; M. Goodman, *Paradise, Gardens, and the Afterlife in the First Century CE*, in M. Bockmuehl, G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views*, Cambridge et al. 2010, 58-63.

[for we act] not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; **but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.** [...] **And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror (κατοπτρίζω), are being transformed (μεταμορφώω) into the same image (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα) from one degree of glory to another;** for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (II Cor 3,13-18).

It appears beyond any doubt that this passage expands and completes the meaning of ICor 13,12, making explicit mention of what one should expect to see in the mirror, which is not explicitly stated in ICor 13,12³¹. Once the veil has fallen (ἀνακαλύπτω), like a mirror (κατοπτρίζω, lexically and semantically connected with ἔσοπτρον), the believer reflects the ‘glory’ of God, assuming a part of his image in some way (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα)³². But II Cor 3,13-18 – which is, by the way, a difficult passage³³ – goes even farther, clarifying the otherwise enigmatic conclusion of ICor 13,12, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην: “then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known”.

In other words, acquiring the faith, the believer stops seeing a distorted image in a mirror, becoming himself a human mirror, reflecting τὴν δόξαν κυρίου, the Glory of the Lord.

Abstract

The article deals with the metaphor of the mirror used by Paul in ICor 13,12, which is discussed in some of its lexical, exegetical and philological implications. The passage, in particular, is compared with II Cor 3,18 and Nm 12,6-8, with a survey of its previous interpretations, both ancient and modern – ICor 13,12 was also pivotal in Augustine thoughts

³¹ P. Corssen, *Paulus und Porphyrios (Zur Erklärung von 2 Kor 3,18)*, Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 19, 1920, 2-10. For the specific anti-Judaic framework of II Cor 3, see L.L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory: Paul's Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.1-18*, Sheffield 1991; S. Hulmi, *Paulus und Moses. Argumentation und Polemik in 2 Kor 3*, Göttingen 1999. On the symbolism of the mirror in this passage, see respectively A. Weissenrieder, *Der Blick in den Spiegel. II Kor 3,18 vor dem Hintergrund antiker Spiegeltheorien und ikonographischer Abbildungen*, in A. Weissenrieder, F. Wendt, P. von Gemünden (eds.), *Picturing the New Testament. Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, Tübingen 2005, 313-343; M. Cover, *Lifting the Veil: 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 in Light of Jewish Homiletic and Commentary Traditions*, Berlin 2015.

³² The concept of the divine image in human form, as asserted by Gn 1,26, seems hinted at here. On anthropomorphism in Paul, see R.H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*, Cambridge 2005; G.H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context*, Tübingen 2008, cap. 1 (*The 'Image of God' in Ancient Judaism*) especially 3, 71-75 and 274, with many elements compared with Philo of Alexandria's approach to the same subject, longly debated: see for instance A. Altmann, *Homo Imago Dei in Jewish and Christian Theology*, *Journal of Religion* 48, 1968, 235-259.

³³ C.K. Stockhausen, *Moses's Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant. The Exegetical Structure of II Cor. 3,1-4,6*, Roma 1989, 87-152; van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology* cit., 333-339.

on God’s vision – from the literal-archaeological approach to the symbolic, spiritual and theological more convincing perspectives.

Riassunto

Nell’articolo è discussa la metafora dello specchio impiegata da Paolo in ICor 13,12, considerata nelle sue principali implicazioni lessicali, filologiche ed esegetiche. Il passo è messo particolarmente a confronto con IICor 3,18 e Nm 12,6-8, prendendo in esame anche le varie interpretazioni avanzate nel tempo (ICor 13,12 è un passo cruciale, ad esempio, nel pensiero di Agostino sulla percezione dell’immagine divina), da quelle più legate alla cultura materiale a quelle, probabilmente più attinenti, legate all’interpretazione teologica, simbolica e spirituale.

Parole chiave: Nuovo Testamento; I Corinzi; Paolo; specchio; visione.

Keywords: New Testament; I Corinthians; Paul; Mirror; Vision.

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