

Israel's senses for the sensual God

The God of the OT, says Fischer, does not encounter human beings apart from the five senses. In Israel's life and worship, sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing were integral not only to daily life but also to worship. In the Hebrew Bible it is not possible to have meaningful knowledge of God without the senses.

"Israels wache Sinne für seinen sinnlichen Gott," *Bibel und Liturgie* 78 (2005): 234–40.

The Judaism that confronts us in the OT is a sensate religion. It is not the intellectual act of faith that can be found in individual statements that stands at the center of Judaism, but a hearing, which, together with action, forms a unity. However, of Aristotle's classical "five senses," not only is hearing important, but so are sight, touch, taste, and smell. A sensate image of humanity also evokes sensate talk about God, and a deity who reveals himself through the senses wants human beings to encounter him with all the senses.

The sense of human joy

Already in Gn 1–2, we see that so-called "sensual joy" is a human determinative in accord with creation. The first creation narrative describes human beings as created in the image and likeness of God and blesses them with fruitfulness. The second narrative, which describes human beings in terms of gender, is even more meaningful when it reaches its climax in the man's exultant joy at the creation of woman: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gn 2:23–24).

If nakedness is an adequate description of an unspoiled sexuality, then sensuality is not only emphasized as part of the scene in Paradise, but is itself a basic element of humanity ordained by God. The narrative of the Fall (Gn 3) describes the brokenness of the sexual relationship. Shame breaks in, and the response to the woman's desire is the dominion of the man over her. Even though the pure joy is perverted, sexual desire is still a primeval human trait which cannot exist apart from the senses.

In the Song of Songs, which on one level can be read as a protest against domination, sexual desire is not described in terms of the woman's relationship to the man (Gn 3:16), but as the man's relationship to his beloved: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me" (7:10).

Sexuality in the Song of Songs involves all the senses, is basic to being human, and celebrates sexuality in all its dimensions. It includes the overwhelming appearance of the beloved (4:1–7), her fragrance (1:12f; 3:6; 4:13f, 16; 5:1, 13; 7:14) and voice (2:14; 5:2), delightful tastes—and not only of kisses (2:3–5; 4:10f, 16; 5:1, 16; 7:10) and stimulating caresses (1:6; 5:4f; 7:9; 8:3). In the Song of Songs the experience of all the senses is celebrated. The joy of the senses is not to be found dis-

tanced from God or in a result of the inclination to sin, which leads to death. Rather, it corresponds to a return of the lovers to a sexual relationship that is in accord with creation.

Suffering and all the senses

Human joy involves all the senses, but so does human suffering. In Job and the psalms of lament, human beings who find themselves in the abyss of life and close to death are perceived by those around them as repulsive; and the sufferers themselves are repulsed by their situation in life. When Job had to hear that all joy would be torn away from his sight and that his ragged skin would be covered with scabs, he sat there in dust and ashes, a perfect image of misery (cf. Job 2:4–13). His breath was repulsive to his wife (19:17), and, like the psalmist whose tongue stuck to his jaws (cf. Ps 22:15) and whose throat was parched (cf. Ps 69:4), the only thing he could taste was death. The full enjoyment of life is not only impaired through the deterioration of the senses but is rendered impossible and results in the sensual perception of pure misery. One could not construct a more stark contrast with respect to the full and rich enjoyment of the senses in human experience than the contrast between the joy expressed through the senses in the Song of Songs and the painful destruction of the senses in the psalms and Job.

From the heights to depths

Aware of the poles of joy and lament, Qoheleth appeals to people in all situations and at every age to indulge the senses. Life is to be savored in the good times before the senses become dulled by age. Enjoying oneself, applying fragrant perfume, dressing in fresh clothes,

and eating and drinking with one's beloved at one's side is to live life as God meant it to be lived (Eccl 9:7–10). When sight and hearing begin to weaken and fail, arms and legs begin to tremble, and the carousing is over; when teeth fall out and all taste is gone, it is too late to enjoy the good life. Though the blossoming almond tree annually announces the return of spring, though the birds may sing their songs as always, though the sun and the moon may shed their customary light, a person who is old and worn out can no longer take pleasure in this good world (cf. Eccl 11:9–12:8). Qoheleth's advice, however, is not indifference based on the awareness of life's transitoriness, but a turning—indeed a well considered turning—toward the world.

The account of Isaac's dying blessing and Jacob's deceit (Gn 27) expresses the full use of the senses. The aged patriarch, who can no longer see what is happening around him, must be deceived by Rebekah and Jacob by an appeal to Isaac's remaining senses. Isaac smells the clothes of his beloved son Esau, but Jacob is wearing them. The goatskins covering Jacob's hands that Isaac touches remind Isaac of the arms of Esau. The wild game that Isaac wants to eat is replaced by a domestic animal, slaughtered and prepared to please the patriarch's palate. Thus, Jacob had to deceive his old, feeble father, who was no longer in control of all his senses, by appealing to those senses that Isaac still possessed. Although his voice gives him away, Jacob has to use it every time he lies about being Esau, Isaac's beloved son (cf. Gn 27:21–27). Nevertheless, the father, who is prepared for death, does not shut off his senses to the world that he is leaving behind.

A God for all the senses

Experiencing life that is open to the senses and that has awakened the senses to all creation in its various facets, does not come by chance in ancient Israel. Although, Yahweh forbade any image of himself (cf. Dt. 4:15–19) that could appeal to the senses and likewise forbade the pronouncing of his name (the meaning of which was, in any case, vague and hence ambiguous), nevertheless, he revealed himself to all the senses. The central encounter with God on Sinai, which reaches its climax in the giving of the Torah and the concluding of the covenant, engages all the senses of the people. God's appearance is described through the phenomenon of a volcano: pillars of fire and clouds indicate God's presence without allowing him to be seen; the eruption appealed to the sense of feeling; the smoke it released appealed to the sense of smell; and for the sense of taste God prepared a meal to seal the covenant (cf. Ex 19:20, 18–21, 24). However, the sense that Israel's God appeals to most is hearing. God's voice rumbles like thunder on the mountain of revelation, but that same voice can be perceived also in a quiet whisper (1 Kg 19:11–13). Above all, YHWH reveals himself at Sinai through and in the word, which he gives in the Torah. In the revelatory scene at Sinai, the people feared seeing God because seeing God could be deadly (cf. Ex 19:21–24; 20:18–21; Dt 5:4f, 23–33). The response of the people of Israel through history, however, is reading, hearing, and living out the instructions of the Torah.

God's seeing and hearing are never indifferent. God suffers with and feels with his people. He is aware of their misery but also opposes their apostasy.

YHWH's perception of how things are with his people and with every human being is the first in a subsequent chain of actions which are experienced as divine acts of salvation but also of punishment. Israel's concept of God crystallizes into that of a deity who accompanies his creation with awakened senses. The accounts of an anthropomorphic God, where the deity eats and drinks something (cf. Gn 18) and smells the costly odors of sacrifice (Gn 8:20), are not expressions of a naive theology that lacks a transcendent perspective. Rather, they bear witness to a well considered theology of creation, where God does not withdraw from his world but is bound to the created good and, after the fall into sin, always knows of new ways of salvation but also of the need for justice.

Praying with all the senses

This God who reveals himself to the senses should also be addressed with all the senses. Israel's prayers are not silent service. Praying is to be audibly murmured and made visible through bodily movement and posture. The psalms are filled with movement, and musical instruments support the singing of the words. With drum, lyre, and trumpet, the people process to the center of the sanctuary (cf. e.g., Pss 48; 118; 150). Their dance, which can also be done while naked (cf. 2 Sm 6:14–22), is part of prayer's bodily movement; it involves not only the well-known back and forth movement of nodding the head in prayer, but also of standing and prostrating oneself, both of which acknowledge and make visible the basic relationship between God and human beings. The *Shema Israel* [Hear, O Israel], which has become the prayer of Judaism and today is written on all the

doors and gates of Jewish houses and settlements, stands as a prime example of Israel's sensory prayer. Not only should one's entire heart, vitality, and power revere God, but also one's desires, needs, and abilities are described in this prayer and should permeate the entirety of a Jewish person's time and space. God is also revered in the practice of the rite of the *tephillin* [phylacteries], which are tied around the forehead and bound to the left arm as an indication that the individual is bound in covenant to the entire people. Israel uses all its senses to come into contact with its God.

The sensory sanctuary

A Catholic worship service in a baroque church is a feast for the senses. Costly materials, the colorful splendor of sanctuary furnishings, and liturgical vestments speak to the eyes. The fragrance of incense creates the atmosphere of a sacred feast. There is contact with water in the magnificent holy water fountain at the beginning and end of the service and in the priest's hand-washing from the richly decorated water container on the altar. Music and the proclamation of the word arouse the hearing and, according to biblical tradition, the bread and wine delight not only the heart but also the soul. In the best sense of the phrase, the baroque worship service was indeed a staged spectacle. According to tradition, these worship elements do not originate in private homes, where early Christians conducted modest celebrations of the Lord's Supper, but in the descriptions of the furnishings of the two most celebrated sanctuaries in the Bible, the Tent of Meeting and the Solomonic temple.

Almost one-third of the Book of Ex-

odus (25–31, 35–40) describes the portable Tabernacle, which, according to the narrative, was built at Sinai and accompanied Israel to the temple at Shiloh, the last legitimate place of the Ark of the Covenant before its transfer to Jerusalem. The descriptions of both the Ark and the Tabernacle include mention of incredibly precious metals, decorations, and materials, most of which were beyond the means of mere mortals. Solomon's temple, which in the theological remembrance should have remained "the" Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 3:12), is, according to this literary tradition, furnished in a like manner. The godhead chose the place which appealed to the fullness of the senses as good enough to dwell in and as the place of encounter with his people (1 Kg 5:15–8:66).

A visit to the Temple impressed all the senses: the gifts carried in one's hands, the marvelous odor of sacrificial smoke, the songs of the choir, the voice of the priest, the ringing of the bells, the beautiful colors and shapes, and, finally, the delicious sacrificial meal, which was shared even by the poorest of the poor.

Christianity, at least since the Constantinian shift, took over this tradition of the decor of the sanctuary and the cult. The church became a great patron of the arts. Since the Enlightenment, however, that tradition has been abandoned to the demands of the avant garde, and, as a result, Christianity became rather averse to the senses and skeptical of satisfying them. Rather than setting the artistic pace with respect to church furnishings, vestments, and music, the church allowed artistic functionalism to become more important. Where this has happened or been overly emphasized, religion has often become su-

perfidious, petty, morally morose, and has proclaimed a trivial God. It is simply impossible to find a deeper sense of things without the senses.

Living and believing with all the senses— a specifically feminine need?

In patriarchal cultures, where males define the *second sex* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), sensuality is predominately associated with the feminine. From the myopic male perspective, “*the woman*,” Eve, could not resist the visual attractiveness of the forbidden fruit. She ate it and brought death into the world. Thus a theology developed that was hostile to women. However, the biblical text states that the man *and* the woman ate of the fruit. In its dichotomous way of thinking, Christian history has viewed the world in terms of opposites. It has seen one half of a pair as better than the other half, instead of seeing both as polarities, both of which are needed to understand the whole. The senses and sensuality became associated with the feminine, and the intellect and spirit became associated with the masculine.

This way of thinking, however, is unbiblical. Men as well as women need to appreciate the importance of the senses and the sensate perception of the divine. Such a sensate perception is seen in the encounter with God through angels, God’s messengers. In the biblical narrative, Hagar is the first person to share a sensate encounter with God (Gn 16). The child’s name and the place where the event occurs are based on hearing and seeing the deity, and the place becomes a cultic site (Gn 16:11–14). Jacob also has such an encounter when, in the darkness of night, he has a sensate identity-establishing experience with the divine. The man who wrestles with Jacob

until daybreak and finally hurts him but still allows him to live, indeed, blesses him, mediates the experience of God which transforms Jacob into Israel (cf. Gn 32:23–33). Penuel, the place where the struggle occurred, is, like Hagar’s El Roi, associated with seeing the deity.

In our Western culture, perhaps women place more emphasis on a sensual experience of God and on talking about God in terms of all the senses. However, neither gender has necessarily integrated the senses into faith formation more successfully than has the other. The theological schema of the field of relationships between God and human beings shows that, apart from the senses, there are no experiences; nor are there experiences of God.

The feast: a constant thread

According to the OT, encounter with God does not occur primarily in the realm of the holy, but in the daily round of life. Israel’s great experiences with God begin in meals.

The promise connected with the origin of the people of Israel is given within the context of a meal. One of the three strange men whom Abraham honors by slaughtering the fatted calf promises Sarah, while eating and drinking under the cool shade of a tree in the midday sun, that “in due season” she will bear a son (Gn 18:1–15). With this son, upon whom the promise of the people and land depend, Israel is founded. The proclamation of the child’s birth is celebrated in the context of a sensual meal, and when the child is weaned another such meal is celebrated (cf. Gn 21:8).

Israel’s liberation from slavery and its establishment as God’s people also occurred within the context of meals.

The last supper in Egypt that founded the paschal meal was held immediately before the exodus, and its ritual completion protected the people from the deadly destruction that was to happen in the night (cf. Ex 12). With the sealing of the covenant at Sinai, where the people obligated themselves to God's word and the stipulations of the law, the chief men of Israel "beheld God, and they ate and they drank" (24:11). Unlike the ancestral narratives, where God is frequently presented anthropomorphically, the narrative of this encounter preserves God's transcendence and uses no anthropomorphic language. Nevertheless, the sealing of the covenant occurs within the context of a sensate event. While eating and drinking, Israel's leaders see the sapphire blue heavenly clouds and understand them as God's throne, which points to the true God (Ex 24:9–10).

Furthermore, Israel understands its communal sacrifice as a meal with the deity. Only one part of the sacrificial animal is given to the godhead on the altar; the major portion is to be eaten with joy in the context of a communal meal with the whole household—including the slaves (cf., e.g., Dt 14:26f). That Israel marks great festivals with special and celebrative prescriptions is the almost unavoidable consequence of the framework of such a theology (cf. the social dimensions of the festival calendar in Dt 16). It is no wonder, then, that when Neh 8 relates the summons of the post-exilic Temple community to obey the Torah, the summons is followed by celebrating a festival meal where everyone is to eat, drink, and be merry (8:12).

Numerous amusing stories in Chris-

tianity tell of the supposed joy of the world beyond. One thinks, for example, of the comedian Karl Valentin's legendary beer-guzzling *Münchener in Himmel*, who is "not always singing hallelujah" in heaven. Such stories reflect a developmental phase of religion that connects the joy of the senses with sin rather than with happiness and bliss. In the Hebrew Bible, notions of life after death are only beginning to develop, and no clear ideas of the fate of the dead are formulated. Nevertheless, there are texts which intimate an imaginary time where things happen which do not happen in this world.

One of these texts is the promise of the great banquet (Is 25:6–8), where God "will swallow up death forever" (25:8). Israel's God, "on this mountain" (Is 25:6; cf. Ex 24, but also the Temple Mount, Zion), will prepare an opulent meal "of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (25:6). In the NT this idea is reflected in the parables which speak symbolically of the heavenly kingdom in terms of a banquet that God prepares, all the way through to Rev 7:17, where "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (cf. Is 25:8). The hope for an end-time community of God is characterized by a joyful banquet, which will finally unveil the limitation of the senses to the unrestrained perception of God (cf. Is 25:7 and its "spiritualized" reception in 2 Cor 3:12–18). Even in the world beyond, the God of the OT does not encounter human beings apart from their senses. In the Hebrew Bible, it is not possible to have a meaningful sense of God without the senses. (BAA)