

THE BIBLICAL EXPRESSION *MASTÎR PĀNÎM*

By

RICHARD ELLIOTT FRIEDMAN

University of California at San Diego

YHWH appeared in the tent in a column of cloud, and the column of cloud stood at the entrance of the tent. And YHWH said to Moses: "When you are lying with your fathers this people will rise and will whore after foreign gods of the land into which they are coming, and they will leave me, and break my covenant which I have made with them. And my anger will burn against them in that day, and I shall leave them, and I shall hide my face from them, and they will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will find them. And they will say in that day: 'Is it not because our God is not in our midst that these evils have found us?'"

The last words of YHWH to Moses prior to summoning him to his death predict a time when the face of YHWH will be hidden from the people of Israel. This expression, "hiding the face," *mastîr pānîm*, first appears in the biblical narrative here at the conclusion of the Pentateuch and occurs thirty times thereafter. The following is a linguistic and conceptual analysis of the expression.

The determination of the root of the first word is problematic. It is generally understood as a form of *str* ("to hide"). Dahood has suggested that the root is more probably *swr* ("to turn") and that we are dealing with an infixed *-t-* form.¹ He thus translates the thirteen appearances of the expression in the Psalms as "turning the face away." Dahood points

1. Cf. Dahood (1965, p. 64), also Dahood (1963, pp. 498f; 1962, pp. 207ff).

to the Greek rendering, which regularly utilizes forms of *apostrephō*² (Vulgate: *avertit faciem suam*), and he suggests that this indicates that the Greek translator understood the verb to be a form of *swr*. He notes further that the expression in Isa 50:6, פני לא הסתרתי מכלמת ורק ("I did not 'turn away' my face from ignominy and spittle") stands in synonymity with אחר לא נסוגתי ("I did not turn backward") in vs. 5, and with נתי נתי למכים ("I gave my back to the smiters") in vs. 6. In Ps 102:3, אל חסתר פניך, ממי ("Do not 'turn' your face from me") stands in contrast to תטה אלי אזנך ("Incline your ear to me").

The extreme rarity of the infixed *-t-* conjugation in Hebrew³ itself argues against Dahood's proposal—as does the existence of a common root *str* whose standard meaning, as we shall see, fits every context in which the expression occurs—unless compelling evidence for the *swr* root can be brought forward. The Greek and Vulgate translations do not constitute such compelling evidence. The Greek use of *apostrephō* merely reflects a difference of idiom between Greek and Hebrew. In Hebrew, as in English, the same verb which is used to express the thought "to hide a book" may be used to express "to hide one's face" or "to hide oneself." That Hebrew verb is *str*. The Greek verb *kryptō*, however, connotes "concealing" or "hiding away." It is thus, in general, a perfectly satisfactory translation of Hebrew *str* and is regularly used to translate that verb, but it is unsatisfactory as a rendering of *mastîr pânîm*, which in no way means "to hide a face," in the sense in which one hides an object. We may compare, for example, Ps 119:19, אל חסתר ממני מצותיך, ממי ("Do not hide your commandments from me"), translated *mē apokpypsēs ap' emou tas entolas sou* with Ps 27:9, אל חסתר פניך ממני, ממי ("Do not hide your face from me"), translated *mē apostrepsēs to prosōpon sou ap' emou*. The Greek translator was forced to seek a non-literal translation to convey the meaning of *mastîr pânîm*, and so he utilized the Greek idiom *apostrephēin to prosōpon*.⁴ The Vulgate translates the Greek. The Greek translator of the Book of Job, confronted with this idiomatic dilemma, chose a more literal, but less Greek, translation. Hence the rendering of למה פניך חסתרתי

2. The only exceptions to the regular Greek translation are the two appearances of the expression in the Book of Job, where the translator employs the verb *kryptō*. This translation will be discussed below.

3. Concerning the infixed *-t-* conjugation, cf. Cross and Freedman (1948, pp. 200f).

4. For examples of the use of forms of the verb *apostrephō* which mark its connotation of turning the face, cf. Xenophon, *Cyropedeia* 5.5.36, and Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* 9.3. Cf. also the Lexicon of Hesychius, in which he explains *apostrepsetai* as *apostreptei to prosōpon*.

(Job 13:24) as *diati ap' emou krupṭē*, and ויסתר פנים (Job 34:29) as *kai krupsei prosōpon*.

The Targum understands the verb to be a form of *str*, for it often translates with the Aramaic *ʾmṛ* ("to hide") (cf. Targum Ps 10:11; 13:2; Isa 50:6), or *ʾlm* (Ps 88:15).⁵

The masoretic pointings, as well, indicate that the MT understands the root to be *str*.

Analysis of the versions thus lends support to the reading of *str* rather than to Dahood's reading of *swr*. The parallels to which Dahood refers in Isaiah 50 and Psalm 102, further, do not constitute sufficient evidence upon which to identify the root as *swr*. The *אחור לא נסוגתי* of Isa 50:5 is a standard poetic formula (cf. Isa 42:17; 59:13, 14; Jer 38:22; 46:5; Zeph 1:6; Ps 35:4; 44:19; 40:15) as is *mastīr pānīm*; the pairing of these two formulaic expressions is contextually appropriate but by no means requires their identification as verbal synonyms. The expressions *gēwī nātattī* and *hattē ʾozneḱā* likewise may be paired quite satisfactorily with forms of either *str* or *swr*; they are hardly compelling evidence for Dahood's reading. In examining the poetic contexts, one must also note that Psalm 10, the first psalm in the final arrangement of the book to use the expression, sets its *leitmotif* in vs. 1 thus:

למה יהוה תעמד ברחוק
תעלים לעתות בצרה

Why do you stand far off YHWH
Why do you hide in times of trouble?

One must question, from a grammatical perspective as well, the presence of an infixed *-t-* form here. While *swr* is intransitive, Dahood's suggestion calls for a *-t-* form of *swr* which is transitive. This is the reverse of what we would expect the function of an infixed *-t-* to be. A *-t-* form which makes an intransitive transitive is sufficiently unexpected in Hebrew as to require explanation of the phenomenon and its historical development. Further, Dahood points to the frequency of the infixed *-t-* conjugation in Ugaritic as indicator of its presence in Hebrew, but the form in Ugaritic is regularly intransitive.

Beyond the factors considered thus far, one must feel extreme skepticism regarding the creation of a special form of a verb, which is used with only one meaning of that verb, and which takes only one object of

5. The more common Targumic translation, *slyq škyntyh*, will be discussed below.

that verb. The resulting difference in the readings, i.e. "turning away" replacing "hiding," affects our understanding of the texts in an exceedingly subtle way and does not bring greater clarity to any passage. The existence of a normal *hip'il* conjugation of *swr* with *pānīm* as its object in 2 Chr 30:9 further reinforces the doubt of the necessity of seeking a rare verbal form. One must therefore regard the root of the expression *masṭîr pānīm* as *str* and translate it as "to hide one's face."

The expression appears in a sufficient number of contexts in the Pentateuch, Prophets, Psalms, and Wisdom Literature to enable one to form an exceedingly clear understanding of its meaning. As we shall see, this meaning remains remarkably consistent in all its contexts, so that *masṭîr pānīm* acquires the status of a formulaic expression and perhaps even of a *terminus technicus*.

Contrary to the more familiar, active forms of divine response to covenant violation, Deuteronomy 31 portrays a punishment of silence in which the presence of YHWH is no longer felt. He will leave the people of Israel (*wa'āzabtîm*). The threat of leaving is followed by the threat that "I shall hide my face from them" (הסתרתני פני מהם). *masṭîr pānīm* and "leaving" are also paired in the beautiful parallel of Isa 54:7f:

ברגע קטן עזבתיך וברחמים גדולים אקבצך
בשצף קצף הסתרתני פני רגע ממך ובחסד עולם רחמתיך

For a small moment I left you,
But in great mercy I shall gather you;
In a flood of anger I hid my face from you for a moment,
But in everlasting *hesed* I shall have mercy on you.

In Ps 27:9 as well, we read:

אל תסתד פנים ממני . . .
אל תשגני ואל תעובני

Do not hide your face from me . . .
Do not forsake me
Do not leave me

The narrative of Deuteronomy 31 does not portray the events which are to follow the hiding of YHWH's face as his doing. It is not suggested that YHWH will be the active cause of Israel's suffering, but rather the "evils and troubles" are themselves the subject of the clause; they will find the people "because our God is not in our midst." *masṭîr pānīm* thus stands beside active divine chastisement as an additional and more terrifying

dimension of YHWH's response to Israel's infidelity. It is one thing for a parent to punish his child severely; it is another for the parent to place the child in a situation of pain and distress and then to leave. In the first case, despite the immediate pain, the bond of the parent and child remains unbroken, and neither the parent's love nor his loyalty is necessarily challenged by his action. In the latter case, the child is lost, has nowhere to appeal for help, and meets pain and terror simultaneously.

In hiding his face, YHWH cuts off his organs of vision and hearing and becomes oblivious to Israel's distress. The expression *mastîr pānîm* thus appears regularly in contexts of seeing and hearing. Not only is it not possible for humans to see him:

ויסתר פנים ומי ישורנו

when he hides his face who can behold him (Job 34:29),

but he does not see them either:

הסתיר פניו בל ראה לנצח

He is hiding his face, never seeing. (Ps 10:11)

He leaves them to their fate and chooses to see only their outcome:

אסתירה פני מהם אראה מה אחריהם

I shall hide my face from them

I shall see what their end will be. (Deut 32:20)

He no longer hears them:

... כי אם עונתיכם היו מבדילים בינכם לבין אלהיכם

וחטאותיכם הסתירו פנים מכם משמוע

... but your sins have separated between you and your God

And your rebellions have hidden (his) face from you, from hearing. (Isa 59:2)

Cf. also Ps 102:5, Ps 27:8f, and Ps 22:25.

Separated, not seeing, nor hearing, YHWH does not answer human cries to him:

או יועקו אל יהוה ולא יענה אותם

ויסתר פניו מהם ...

Then they will cry to YHWH

And he will not answer them

And he will hide his face from them ... (Mic 3:4)

Cf. also Ps 143:7 and Ps 69:17f.

The hiding of YHWH's face is compared to his having forgotten those to whom he formerly related:

למה פניך תסתיר
חשכה ענינו ולחצנו

Why do you hide your face
You forget our affliction and our distress. (Ps 44:25)

Cf. also Ps 13:2.

In all contexts, *mastîr pânîm* is regarded, explicitly or implicitly, as response to covenant betrayal (excepting the two uses in Job). The declaration אסתירה פני מהם of Deut 32:20, probably the earliest appearance of the expression, is part of the judgment of a covenant litigation (*rib*) against Israel for looking to other gods.⁶ In Deuteronomy 31, covenant betrayal is stated specifically to be Israel's offense—vs. 6, והפר את בריתי — the result of which is:

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא על כל
הרעה אשר עשה כי פנה אל אלהים אחרים

And I shall utterly hide my face on that day
because of all the evil which they have done,
for they have looked to other gods. (vs. 18)

The prophetic appearances of the expression likewise clearly mark *mastîr pânîm* as the ultimate divine response to Israel's infidelity to the covenant.⁷

The contextual environment in which *mastîr pânîm* figures makes its meaning quite clear. Responding to Israel's disloyalty, YHWH leaves his covenanted people, forgets them, i.e. pays them no regard, allows all forms of suffering to strike them, does not see or hear them, does not answer their cries, ceases to be available to them, and no longer makes his presence known to them.

Thus the usual Targumic translation *slyq škyntyh* ("he removes his presence") though non-literal, conveys excellently that which is meant by *mastîr pânîm*. Indeed, the term *pânîm*, in various forms, particularly *lipnê*, clearly denotes "presence." One may note especially the following sister expressions of *mastîr pânîm*: הכרתי מעל פני (2 Kgs 17:18; 23:27);

6. Cf. Wright (1962) and Albright (1959). Wright sets boundaries for dating this song between 900 and 600 and indicates that an earlier date within these limits is more probable.

7. Cf. Isa 8:17; 54:8; 57:17; 59:2; 64:6; Jer 33:5; Ezek 39:23, 24, 29; Mic 3:4.

(1 Kgs 9:11); הסבתי פני (Ezek 7:22); השלכתי מעל פני (1 Kgs 9:7; 2 Kgs 13:23; 17:20; 24:20); יסיר פנים (2 Chr 30:9).

Talmudic understanding of the expression likewise reflects a recognition of diminished divine immanence⁸ despite rabbinic resistance to the idea that the God of Israel might wholly forsake his people. Thus (*Hagiga* 5b):

And I shall hide my face in that day. Raba said: Although I hide my face from them I shall speak to them in a dream. Rabbi Joseph said: His hand is stretched over us, as it is said: And I have covered thee in the shadow of my hand. (Isa 51:16)

Raba's extreme *drash* on the extraneous phrase *in that day* underscores his theological difficulty, but his interpretation nonetheless reflects his understanding of *mastîr pānîm* as a state in which direct divine communication is ended. The latter interpretation reflects the same difficulty and a similar understanding. The comment of *Sifre* on Deut 32:20 parallels the Targumic understanding that YHWH's immanence has ended in Israel:

יאמר אסתירה פני מהם. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא
הריני מסלק שכינתי מביניכם

And he said, I shall hide my face from them.

The Holy One Blessed Be He said: Behold I remove
my presence from their midst.

The medieval rabbinic commentators likewise understood "I shall hide my face" to mean that YHWH ceases to be available to Israel. Rashi: כמו שאיני רואה בצרתם ("As if I do not see their troubles"). Ibn Ezra: שאם יקראו אלי לא אענם ("I shall hide . . . so that if they call to me I shall not answer"). Ramban: כאשר יבקשוני לא ימצאוני ("When they seek me they will not find me"). Ramban, by way of explanation, refers us to Isa 1:15:

ובפרשכם כפיכם אעלים עיני מכם
גם כי תרבו תפלה אינני שמע

And when you spread your hands I shall hide my eyes from you
Also when you multiply prayer I shall not listen.

8. As indicated by the direction of our discussion thus far, we understand the term *immanence* in terms of the divine presence on earth, divine closeness expressed in apparent participation in human events.

The fact that *mastîr pānîm* appears thirty times in the Hebrew Bible in early and late materials with extremely minimal variation in meaning suggests that it was a known and well-understood expression, perhaps even a *terminus technicus* for the fact of YHWH's receding immanence. Its status as a known *terminus technicus* is further indicated by the appearances of the poetic form in which *pānîm* bears no pronominal suffix. Thus in Isa 59:2 we read: *הטאוהיכם הסתירו פנים מכם משמוע* ("Your sins have hidden [his] face from you"). We would more properly have expected *pānāw*, corresponding to *'ēlohêkem* of the previous colon, but the familiarity of the expression made it possible for the prophet to use this form which is, in our judgment, more powerful aesthetically and psychologically. Likewise we read in Job 34:29, *ויסתר פנים ומי ישורנו* ("And he hides [his] face and who can see him"). Again the pronominal identification is lacking, though the meaning is clear, similar to the use of the phrase *to save face* in English, which is possible because the phrase is a known idiom.

The understanding of *mastîr pānîm* at which we have arrived suggests a reconsideration of the standard translation of Isa 53:3, in which *וכמסתר פנים ממנו* has regularly been translated "... and as one from whom *men* hide their faces . . ." The subject of the participle *mastēr* is not identified, and *pānîm* bears no pronominal suffix. Modern translators have regarded the *men* (*'išîm*) of the previous colon (3a) as the understood subject—though this couples a plural subject with the singular participle. The Greek translator made the suffering servant himself the subject, rendering the phrase *hoti apestriptai to prosōpon autou*, reading the Hebrew as *כי מסתיר פנים*. The Greek reading, a far-fetched attempt to deal with the singular participle, calls for a meaning of *mastîr pānîm* unknown elsewhere, i.e., as an expression of abject shame. A more probable reading of this text would be one which understands God to be the subject of *mastēr pānîm*, as is the case in nearly all the other appearances of the expression.⁹ The colon would then stand in parallel not with the preceding colon (3a) but rather with its counterpart in the following verse (4b) in which the suffering servant is described as being regarded as "stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." This pairing of the two b-cola draws further support by the repetition of the verb *hāšabnūhū* in each and by the neat pairing which the two a-cola make, thus:

9. The two exceptions in which humans are the subjects (Exod 3:6; Isa 50:6) both identify *pānîm* with pronominal suffixes.

נבזה וחרל אישים איש מכאבות וידוע חלי (3a)

אכן חלינו הוא נשא ומכאבינו סבלם (4a)

(3a) Despised and forsaken by men, a man of pains and acquainted with sickness

(4a) But in fact he bore *our* sicknesses and stood our pains.

The Targum also understands the phrase to refer to God as subject, translating thus: *km' dhwyt mslq' 'py skynt' mnn'*.

The regular understanding of *mastîr pānîm*, the poetic structure of vss. 3 and 4, and the Targumic translation argue for a rendering of Isa 53:3 which sees God as subject.

mastîr pānîm thus is to be understood as a state in which, over and above any active divine chastisement, the immanence of YHWH ceases to be felt in the midst of the people of Israel; and this phenomenon is regarded as YHWH's response to betrayal of his covenant, i.e. looking to other gods. The striking form which the portrayal of this phenomenon takes in the biblical narrative is the subject of a coming study.

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