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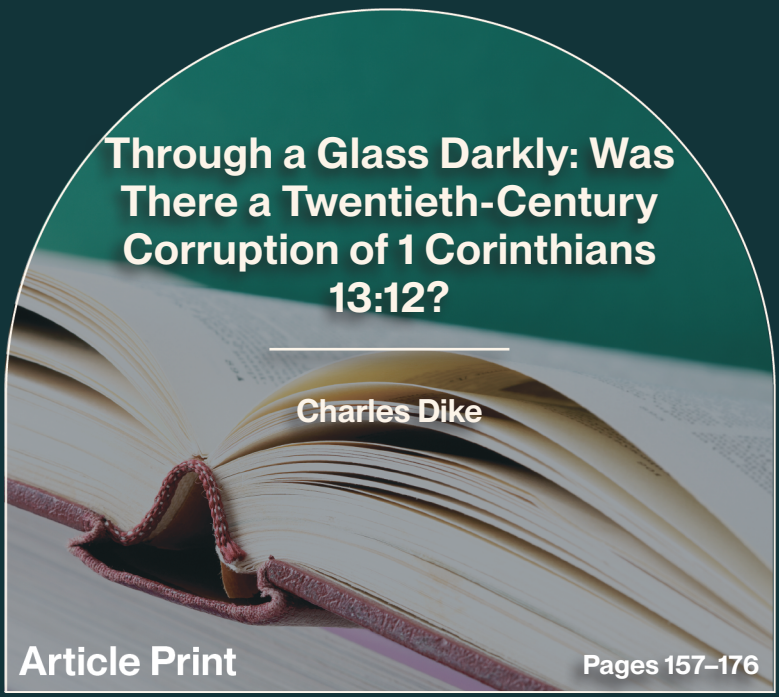

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Through a Glass Darkly: Was There a Twentieth-Century Corruption of 1 Corinthians 13:12?

Charles Dike

Abstract: *This paper considers the well-known account of Paul having been struck blind on the road to Damascus and his equally well-known statement that "for now we see through a glass darkly." Both are examined in light of a solar eclipse that occurred across the Mediterranean in AD 49. It is possible that Paul could have been referring to an experience of viewing the solar eclipse through a filter. The article provides an exploration of potential astronomical aids that may have been available to first-century viewers of the eclipse. Views of solar phenomenon are shown and then Jewish and Christian thoughts are discussed regarding glass, crystals, clouds, and the veil. At the end of the nineteenth century, a conflict arose among commentators about whether 1 Corinthians 13:12 was referring to looking at a reflection in a cloudy mirror or viewing an eclipse through darkened glass. Ultimately those advocating for an interpretation of his words as referring to a reflection in a blurry mirror prevailed. However, based on new information and on the religious context, the darkened-glass interpretation appears to be the correct one. The paper concludes with the presentation of a Jewish perspective of the darkened glass, which, typologically, equates to a veil.*

This article explores Paul's letters to the Corinthians from several perspectives. First, that he was temporarily blinded by looking upon the resurrected Christ. Second, that he was steeped in Jewish traditions, having been trained by Gamaliel, a well-respected Jewish Pharisee and rabbi. Third, that he lived in a Roman- and

Greek-influenced world. Fourth, and most significantly, that the whole of the Ancient Near East had witnessed a "ring of fire" solar eclipse on 20 May AD 49 approximately four years before he wrote his letter to the Corinthians.

A Brief Overview of Saul/Paul's Blindness

When travelling to Damascus to persecute the believers of Christ, Saul was interrupted when "suddenly there shined about him a bright light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'" (Acts 9:3–4).[1] Paul learned that day the cost of looking at the resurrected Lord face to face — he went blind and remained so for three days (v. 9:9).[2] Paul appears to have been exhausted by his experience. This is suggested by verse 22 where he "increased the more in strength." Finally, Ananias was instructed of the Lord to lay his hands on Paul and heal his blindness.

In about AD 57, while addressing a hostile mob in Jerusalem, Paul stated,

> I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day. (Acts 22:3)

Paul then proceeded to relate his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:6–17). Moreover, everyone who had heard of Paul would have known of the cause of his blindness and his miraculous healing. Paul is said to have suffered from some infirmity throughout the rest of his life (2 Corinthians 12:7, Galatians 4:13, 14). What that infirmity consisted of is a matter of speculation. One possibility is that Paul's eyes never completely recovered from his experience. In his epistle to the Galatians he uses his eyes as evidence that Jesus Christ lives and was crucified: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you,

1. It is often believed that Saul received a change of name to Paul. In reality, the two are the same name, *Saul* being the Hebrew form and *Paul* the Roman form. See, for example, "Why Did God Change Saul's Name to Paul?," *Catholic Answers*, catholic.com/qa/why-did-god-change-sauls-name-to-paul.
2. Saul also went without food or drink at that time. This has a parallel to Moses on Sinai (Exodus 34:28). There was opportunity for Saul to receive instruction from the Lord, much like Moses did on Sinai.

that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (Galatians 3:1).[3] Later he wrote, "I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me" (Galatians 4:15). This suggests that Paul's eyes may have been allowed to remain somewhat damaged after the laying on of hands by Ananias to serve as a reminder and as a witness to Paul's audience that he had seen the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus.[4]

Paul's Solar Eclipse

On 20 May AD 49, an annular eclipse of the sun occurred. This eclipse has been documented by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), who show that the path of the eclipse ran across Africa through the ancient Levant and on to Asia as can be seen in figure 1.[5] Figure 2 shows a close-up of this path, which ran just north of Jerusalem and right over Antioch. The eclipse allowed observers to see the edge of the sun around the moon, which is known as a "ring of fire" eclipse (figure 3).[6] It was not a total eclipse because the moon was unable to block the sun completely—the moon was simply too far from the earth. This made it particularly dangerous to look at without some form of eye protection.[7] Observers would have watched as

3. In Ephesians 1:18 Paul uses the phrase, "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened." This may be an allusion to his eye damage as a witness to Christ's calling.
4. N. T. Wright suggests that plucking out eyes could have been a well-known metaphor in the first century that has been lost to us. If so, it is impressively apropos. N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 123. Regarding Paul's ailment, Jerald C. Joersz states, "The proposals are numerous, such as epilepsy, hysteria, depression, severe eye trouble, malaria, leprosy, a speech impediment and rheumatism. The sheer number and variety of these speculations suggest that we probably will never be able to identify with certainty what Paul's problem was." Jerald C. Joersz, "What was Paul's Ailment?," *Lutheran Witness*, 4 April 2011, witness.lcms.org/2011/what-was-pauls-ailment-4-2011/.
5. Fred Espenak and Jean Meeus, *Five Millennium Canon of Solar Eclipses: -1999 to + 3000* (NASA TP-2006-214141, October 2006), eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/5MCSE/5MCSE-Maps-05.pdf.
6. The eclipse in the United States on 21 August 2017 completely blocked out the sun because the moon was closer to the earth on that day than on 20 May AD 49. The 8 April 2024 eclipse was similar to Paul's eclipse.
7. See Mark Littmann, Fred Espenak, and Ken Willcox, *Totality: Eclipses of the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153–60, google.com/books/edition/Totality/u3iPPc7Q9b0C?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA153. The authors explain the

darkness descended and would have been aware of a sharp drop in temperature. For those in the center of the eclipse path, the event would have lasted over four minutes. As it ended, they would again feel the heat of the day as the moon no longer blocked the sun.

Is it possible that this commonly shared event may have been on Paul's mind when he wrote to the Corinthians and that many in his audience would have understood any allusions to the eclipse?[8] Modern readers of his letters do not have the benefit of considering this possibility if they are not aware of the eclipse having occurred in that location and at that time just four years earlier.

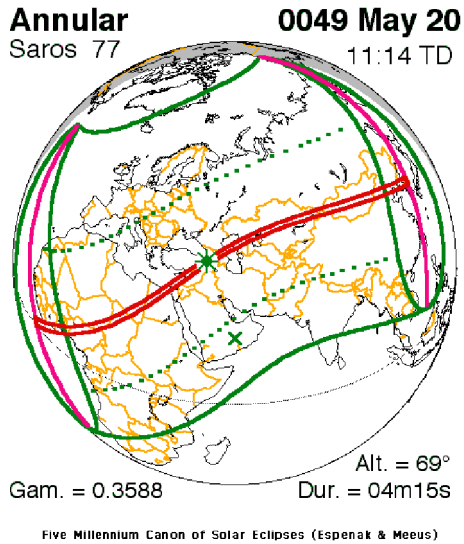

Figure 1. Path of the annular eclipse on 20 May AD 49. Image from NASA, eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/5MCSEmap/0001-0100/49-05-20.gif.

Figure 2. Close-up of the path of the eclipse as drawn by the author. The area between the two bands is the ring-of-fire area. The bands mark where the Moon's coverage remains within the perimeter of the Sun's photosphere. Those outside the bands would see a partial eclipse.

Paul's First Letter to the People at Corinth

As an apostle, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians in about AD 52 or 53.[9] It was

dangers of viewing the sun during partial and annular eclipses, noting that it requires special eye protection or indirect viewing to avoid eye damage.

8. Frank F. Judd Jr., "The Epistles of the Apostle Paul: An Overview," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 424–25.
9. There was at least one letter to the Corinthians prior to the letter labelled 1 Corinthians. See 1 Corinthians 5:9.

Figure 3. Ring-of-fire annular eclipse at Canton, Ohio, 8 April 2024. Photograph by Whitney Zunic Deich.

intended to correct some improper behavior among the Corinthians, instruct them in proper behavior, and expound on general Christian principles. Paul is speaking on practical matters and pulling on both personal and shared experiences. Paul reminds the listeners that he has seen Jesus Christ and been tasked to instruct them: "Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1). This verse provides an authoritative context based on his experiences and sets the stage for his later comments in this same letter. He offers his well-known, but widely less understood, metaphor: "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" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Many of the people could recall Paul's face-to-face experience with Christ and also their experience seeing a ring-of-fire solar eclipse some four years earlier.

Paul makes one last comment regarding seeing the resurrected Christ as he works toward the conclusion of the letter: "And last of all

he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time" (1 Corinthians 15:8). He then tells his audience that "there are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another" (1 Corinthians 15:40). Paul's audience can conclude that the resurrected Christ is as bright as the sun and that Christ is the "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2).

Whether Paul was in Jerusalem or Antioch in May AD 49 when the ring of fire occurred, he would have experienced the impact of the event. The Corinthians would only have experienced a partial eclipse.[10] Paul, the Corinthians, and the population in the path of the eclipse would have needed some kind of eye protection to look toward the sun. One possibility is that some may have used either polished obsidian or deeply colored glass to protect their eyes. When Paul later mentioned the darkened glass, most of the Corinthians would have already been familiar with that glass. Pliny described just how popular the darkened glass was.

Materials Available to Paul for Solar Observation

Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24–79) was a contemporary of Paul and an astute observer of science and nature. Among his other works, he produced an encyclopedia known as *Natural History*.[11] Pliny wrote of obsidian, a naturally occurring volcanic glass that he called a stone, and darkened man-made glass which he called "obsian":

> In our classification of glass we include also "obsian" ware, so named from its resemblance to the stone found by Obsius in Ethiopia. This stone is very dark in colour and sometimes translucent, but has a cloudier appearance than glass, so that when it is used for mirrors attached to walls it reflects shadows rather than images. Gems are frequently made of it, and we have seen also the solid obsidian statues of the deified Augustus, for the substance can yield pieces bulky enough for this purpose. Augustus himself dedicated

10. Corinth was approximately 750 miles west of Antioch and 630 miles from the edge of totality (defined here as the moon being 100% within the perimeter of the sun's photosphere). Even so, they would have been aware of the eclipse, though they would not have experienced totality. See figure 1, where NASA marks 50% visibility of the eclipse with dotted green lines. Anyone within this very wide area would have been aware of the eclipse.
11. Pliny, *Natural History*, Book II: 24, www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D24.

> as a curiosity four elephants of obsidian in the temple of Concord, while the Emperor Tiberius for his part restored to the cult of the Sun-god at Heliopolis an obsidian statue of Menelaus which he found included in a legacy from one Seius who had been governor of Egypt. This statue proves that the origin of the stone, which is nowadays misrepresented because of its similarity to the glass, is of an earlier date. . . . There is also the artificial "obsian" glass which is used as a material for tableware, this being produced by a coloring process, . . . There is, furthermore, opaque white glass and others that reproduce the appearance of fluorspar, blue sapphires or lapis lazuli, and, indeed glass exists in any color. There is no other material nowadays that is more pliable or more adaptable, even to painting. However, the most highly valued glass is colourless and transparent, as closely as possible resembling rock-crystal. But . . . for making drinking vessels the use of glass has indeed ousted metals such as gold and silver.[12]

What Pliny was telling the world was that two different materials were available, obsidian and glass, either of which could have been used for eye protection. Evidence points to the ancients using eye protection when looking at the sun. There is also evidence, presented below, that the people used obsidian for windows. Further, Pliny claimed that "obsian" (certainly glass colored black) was so common as to be used for tableware (figure 4) and glass had, in fact, replaced gold and silver for making drinking vessels. Pliny, in a few words, demonstrates that while artists in his day worked complex designs in obsidian (figure 5), that material was confused with darkened glass.

It has been documented that there were many dark obsidian objects that were essentially flat and had been polished on both sides.[13]

12. Pliny, *Natural History*, Book XXXVI: 67, attalus.org/translate/pliny_hn36b.html.
13. Elizabeth Healey, "Not Only a Tool-Stone: Other Ways of Using Obsidian in the Near East," *Journal of Lithic Studies* 8, no. 3 (2021): 43, academia.edu/85772831/Not_only_a_tool_stone_Other_ways_of_using_obsidian_in_the_Near_East. Healey mentions that mirrors have been around for 9,000 years. She points out that "Objects with a flat, smooth and very highly polished, reflective surface, usually circular or sub-circular in shape, are often described as mirrors even though they do not reflect an image in the same way as a silvered glass mirror does. . . . There seem to be two types, one on chunky blanks, the other with two more-or-less parallel surfaces, a sub-variety of which has a

Figure 4. Roman 1st half of first century AD. Left to right: mosaic glass ribbed bowl (millefiori bowl), bluish-green ribbed glass bowl, dark-blue ribbed glass bowl. Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245190.

Through experimentation I have determined that they were thick enough to block out much of the sun's light. A claimed obsidian revetment slab fragment (first century), currently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, has properties that argue it is a panel designed to block most of the sunlight (see figure 5). The obsidian is black and about 5/8 inches thick—typical of solar filters. The depth of the carved pattern is constant, something that one would prefer if sunlight was designed to pass through it. The museum describes the obsidian in this manner:

Figure 5. Roman first century AD obsidian. Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250493.

> Obsidian, a natural volcanic glass, was used by the Romans for sculpture, vessels, and—as here—decorative panels. The ivy and vine tendrils originally may have been filled with inlays in contrasting colors, as in the case of the obsidian

strap handle." Mirrors don't need polished parallel surfaces—these would have an additional use as a light filter.

cup with Egyptianizing ritual scenes found at Stabiae and now in the Archaeological Museum, Naples.[14]

This is a piece of art; it is a backlit decorative panel designed to enhance the carved pattern using sunlight. Any artisan would be constantly checking for the proper thickness of the block while it was being polished because obsidian transparency is variable. The artisan must polish the obsidian to a depth that is comfortable for viewing. Whether the design is carved first or last, an object is created that *incidentally* protects one's eyes from harsh sunlight, as seen in figure 6.

Sophisticated Solar Observations

There is evidence that observations of sunspots and eclipses were common among ancient astronomers. F. Richard Stephenson commented that "many valuable observations of [solar] eclipses — both timed and untimed — are extant in the history of certain early cultures: almost exclusively Babylon, China, Europe and the Arab dominions."[15] In particular, the Babylonians frequently recorded lunar and solar eclipses. Zoltan Simon speculates that kings may have been observing solar eclipses using dark glass as early as the Old Babylon Dynasty (roughly beginning in 1900 BC).[16]

A Babylonian eclipse

One Babylonian astronomical tablet contained a record of the solar eclipse of 15 April 136 BC. Stephenson also stated that the following example is "without parallel over the whole of the pre-telescopic period. Not only did the astronomers time its various phases, they also noted that the eclipse was total."[17]

14. "Obsidian Revetment Slab Fragment," Greek and Roman Art, The Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250493.
15. F. Richard Stephenson, "Historical Eclipses and Earth's Rotation," *Astronomy & Geophysics* 44, no. 2 (April 2003): 2.24, doi.org/10.1046/j.1468-4004.2003.44222.x.
16. Zoltan A. Simon, "Astronomy and Ancient Eclipse Art—Is It a Science?," *Art & Humanities Open Access Journal* 2, no. 5 (2018): 283, medcraveonline.com/AHOAJ/astronomy-and-ancient-eclipse-artndashis-it-a-science.html.
17. Stephenson, "Historical Eclipses," 2.24. Probably the reason this report was "without parallel" was because the eclipsing moon was at perigee—the closest distance to the earth that the moon ever comes. The ancients recognized this as a unique solar eclipse. My Starry Night® Enthusiast 7 program (Simulation Curriculum Corp., Minnetonka, MN) allows me to see the sky in

Figure 6. The Sun just above a tree line seen through an obsidian disk on a hazy day. The green tint is indicative of magnetite in the obsidian. Photo by the author.

> (Year) 175, month XII_2. The 29th (day), at 24 time-deg after sunrise, solar eclipse; when it began on the south-west side, in 18 time-deg of daytime it was entirely total; Venus, Mercury and the Normal Stars were visible; Jupiter and Mars, which were in their period of invisibility, were visible in that eclipse. It threw off (the shadow) from south-west to north-east; 35 time-deg (duration) of onset, maximal phase and clearing, (trans. H Hunger).[18]

The Babylonian astronomers knew where to expect four planets in the daytime. (Jupiter on this day was so close to the sun as to appear to be nearly touching it.) This shows a good deal of knowledge about the observable solar system, and one can be sure they anticipated the solar eclipse based on their studies. They also lived in a time and

136 BC on my computer. That day Jupiter was so close to the sun (about 2 arcminutes) that it was partly occluded by the moon during the eclipse (subject to the accuracy of the program).

18. Stephenson, "Historical Eclipses," 2.24–25.

place where obsidian and darkened glass were available to them and artists were working in those mediums. It is a short and plausible step to produce an obsidian disk to protect their eyes while observing the sun (see figure 6).

Sunspot observation

"The first clear mention of a sunspot in Western literature is circa 300 BC, by ancient Greek scholar Theophrastus, student of Plato and Aristotle and successor to the latter."[19] By 28 BC, Chinese astronomers regularly recorded sunspot observations in official imperial records.[20] Sunspots can sometimes be seen without a telescope and eye protection through the haze of the day.[21] Clearly, over time, this could lead to eye damage. Unfortunately, the method used to see the sunspots by the ancient professionals on a regular basis has not been found, although some have suggested that using reflecting pools as eye protection could be possible. This seems unlikely because water is highly reflective.[22]

Altogether, there is significant evidence of an understanding that filters were needed and were available in the Ancient Near East.[23] If so, this might have influenced Paul's writing, providing a common experience that would have resonated with his readers or listeners.

Jewish Thought on Dark Glass and a Veil

Because Paul was "a Jew . . . brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" (Acts 22:3), it is important to see what may have influenced him from a Jewish perspective.

19. "Sunspot," *Wikipedia*, wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunspot.
20. Robert K. G. Temple, "The Observation of Sunspots," *UNESCO Courier* 41, no. 10 (1988): 9, unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000081672.
21. J. E. Mossman, "A Comprehensive Search for Sunspots Without the Aid of a Telescope, 1981–1982," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 30 (March 1989): 59–64, adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1989QJRAS..30...59M.
22. Rosdi Kasim, "Is it safe to watch solar eclipse's reflection in water?" StackEchange, last updated 2 March 2016, astronomy.stackexchange.com/questions/13948/is-it-safe-to-watch-solar-eclipses-reflection-in-water.
23. Polished "mirrors" of obsidian are known to have existed at least seven centuries before Christ. Stuart Campbell et al., "The Mirror, the Magus and More: Reflections on John Dee's Obsidian Mirror," *Antiquity* 95, no. 384 (December 2021): 1547–64, doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.132.

The tractate Yevamot (Brother's Widow) 49b:10 in the Babylonian Talmud reads:

> The Gemara [a rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah] resolves the first contradiction: "I saw the Lord" is to be understood as it is taught in a *baraita* [ancient Jewish tradition]: All of the prophets observed their prophecies through an obscure looking glass [*aspaklaria*], i.e., their prophecies were given as metaphoric visions but were not a direct perception of the matter. However, Moses our master observed his prophecies through a clear looking glass, i.e., he gained a direct and accurate perception of the matter.[24]

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in 2009 that "the midrash, in the deceptively simple way that it teaches its deepest and most subtle insights, is suggesting that truth on Earth can never aspire to the pristine clarity of truth in heaven. We see 'as through a glass, darkly.'"[25] Further, Sacks indicates that "in Aramaic, *Be'ispaklaria she'einah me'ira*: *Yevamot* 49b, *Sanhedrin* 97b . . . seems to be the source of the famous phrase used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12."[26]

Regarding the *Sanhedrin* 97b:11, Rabbi Steinsaltz states:

> The Gemara answers: It is not difficult; this statement of [Rabbi] Abaye refers to the thirty-six righteous people who view the Divine Presence through a luminous crystal [*be'ispaklarya*], and that statement of [Rabbi] Rava refers to the multitudes who view the Divine Presence through a crystal that is not luminous.[27]

If so, that introduces another possible meaning for the Koine Greek word *katoptron*. Paul may have been mentioning a specific type of

24. Yevamot 49b:10, *The William Davidson Talmud* (Koren-Steinsaltz), *Sefaria*, sefaria.org/Yevamot.49b.10?lang=bi.
25. Jonathan Sacks, "Vayechi, The White Lie," in *Covenant and Conversation; Genesis; The Book of the Beginnings* (2009), 28, sefaria.org/Covenant_and_Conversation%3B_Genesis%3B_The_Book_of_the_Beginnings%2C_Vayechi%2C_The_White_Lie.28?lang=bi.
26. Sacks, "Vayechi, The White Lie," 28n10.
27. William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud, with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Sanhedrin* 97b:11, sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.97b.11-12?ven=english|William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&lang=bi. Ether 3:1 has the brother of Jared producing sixteen small stones "white and clear, even as transparent glass" in anticipation of the Lord turning them into luminous stones.

crystal in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and considered *katoptron* a reasonable Greek substitute for his Aramaic word. This verse, in context, is:

> Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, *which* put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which *veil* is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even* as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3: 12–18)

We see in the Corinthian letters similar parallel themes wherein observers need an object interposed between them and an intense light:

- Paul looking toward the Lord was blinded without eye protection from the Lord's glory (Acts 9:8–9).
- A sinner looking toward the Lord is unable to see him clearly as if through darkened glass (1 Corinthians 13: 12).
- The minds of the children of Israel were blinded and required a veil to look on Moses (2 Corinthians 3: 13).
- The hearts of the children of Israel were veiled so they could not see Christ in the writings of Moses (2 Corinthians 3: 15).

We see these parallel themes in Jewish traditions as mentioned in the Gemara:

- All the Israelite prophets observed their prophecies through an obscure looking-glass.
- Multitudes view the Divine Presence through a crystal that is not luminous.
- Thirty-six righteous people view the Divine Presence through a luminous crystal.

For a Jew, the multitudes would look through a crystal to view the Divine Presence. For the eclipse, if my hypothesis is correct, some of the observers would look through a darkened glass to see the sun.

The Kefer Malkat is a prayer in poetic form that contains praises

of God and requests for forgiveness. It is recited by some communities on Yom Kippur after the evening service. Chapter 7:1 reads, "Thou art Light celestial, and the eyes of the pure shall behold Thee But the clouds of sin shall veil Thee from the eyes of the sinners." This prayer was put into poetic form between c. 1040–c. 1060 CE by Solomon ibn Gabirol.[28] Compare this to Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:12–16, above.

We have seen the obscure looking-glass in Jewish tradition, the clouds of sin, unrighteousness, and the veil serving a similar purpose. Paul states of the Israelites with Moses that "their minds were blinded" (2 Corinthians 3:12). This obliged Moses to temporarily wear a veil after meeting God. Similarly, the cloud hides God from sinners precisely so that they will not be destroyed by his glory. Even Moses could not look on the full glory of God (Exodus 33:18–23). But if we have enough faith, like the brother of Jared, the cloud/veil will be removed (Ether 3:6–13 — see especially verse 9). Paul refers to these clouds in his first letter to the Corinthians:

> Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1 Corinthians 10:1–2)

This verse may be a lead-in to Paul's theme of ultimately seeing God face to face in 1 Corinthians 13:12. Matthew, Mark, and Luke also mention the cloud at the transfiguration. Each story is somewhat different, which confuses what exactly is happening. One might suspect that Peter, James, and John were able to traverse part of the cloud (Luke 9:34) in order to see Moses, Elias, and the transfigured Christ. But this speculation is beyond the scope of the article. The three scriptures cited below show that the Father remained in the cloud and was not visible to the disciples:

> While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. (Matthew 17:5)
>
> And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a

28. Israel Zangwill, trans., *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1923), Keter Malkhut 7, sefaria.org/Keter_Malkhut?tab=contents.

> voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. (Mark 9:7)
>
> While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. (Luke 9:34–35)

It is the cloud that hides the glorified Jesus from those with a lack of faith. Matthew states, "Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64; see also Acts 1:9). Angels, too, pass through the clouds that block our view of the heavenly realms.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians before he wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians:

> Then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

The idea that summarizes the latter book, that we shall be raised incorruptible, is reflected in 1 Thessalonians. What we see is a barrier through which we must pass in order to see the Lord face to face. The temple veil appears to represent the clouds of sin that obscure our view of the Lord. In a parallel fashion, the darkened glass of 1 Corinthians 13:12 appears to be a representation to Paul of the clouds — for now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face. This is that parallel that Paul draws in 2 Corinthians 3:12–18.

Commentators on Mirrors Versus Glass

Having argued that Paul was aware of darkened glass being available to view the sun, I now turn to commentators referring to 1 Corinthians 13:12. A debate began in the nineteenth century as to whether Paul was mentioning darkened glass or if he was writing about a mirror.

Nineteenth-century commentators on mirrors

Barnes's *Notes on the Bible* from 1884,

> Many have supposed . . . that the idea here is that of seeing objects by reflection from a mirror, which reflects only their imperfect forms. But this interpretation does not well accord with the apostle's idea of seeing things obscurely.

> The most natural idea is that of seeing objects by an imperfect medium, by looking "through" something in contemplating them. . . .
>
> It is, therefore, probable that [Paul] refers to those transparent substances which the ancients had, and which they used in their windows occasionally; such as thin plates of horn, transparent stone, etc. Windows were often made of the "lapis specularis" described by Pliny (XXXVI, 22), which was pellucid, and which admitted of being split into thin "laminae" or scales, probably the same as mica. Humboldt mentions such kinds of stone as being used in South America in church windows — Bloomfield. It is not improbable, I think, that even in the time of Paul the ancients had the knowledge of glass, though it was probably at first very imperfect and obscure.

Barnes then rather oddly, in the same paragraph, states,

> It is known that glass was in quite common use about the commencement of the Christian era. In the reign of Tiberius an artist had his house demolished for making glass malleable. About this time drinking vessels were made commonly of glass; and glass bottles for holding wine and flowers were in common use. . . . There is, therefore, no impropriety in supposing that Paul here may have alluded to the imperfect and discolored glass which was then in extensive use; for we have no reason to suppose that it was then as transparent as that which is now made. It was, doubtless, an imperfect and obscure medium, and, therefore, well adapted to illustrate the nature of our knowledge here compared with what it wilt be in heaven.[29]

I agree with Barnes's assessment of the functionality of the imperfect medium. Obsidian is a natural glass that was readily available to people in Paul's time, and they could shape it as they desired. Glass was also readily available. Barnes quoted XXXVI, 22, but did not reference XXXVI, 67, which is a superior chapter in regard to available transparent materials. See my earlier Pliny quote and the excellent glass work shown in figure 4.

29. Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), 274, books.google.com/books?id=P5csAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover.

In 1889, Marcus Dods captures the cultural context of what would be expected of a Jew in Paul's day. Paul was, after all, a well-schooled Jew. Dods is arguing in favor of Barnes's opinion. Significantly, Dods uses a statement by rabbis in defense of Paul's darkened glass.

> [T]here is a great difference of opinion as to what Paul means by seeing now "through a glass, darkly." The word here rendered "glass" is used either for the dim metallic mirror used by the ancients, or for the semi-translucent talc which was their substitute for glass in windows. Of these two meanings it is the latter which in this passage gives the best sense. It was a common figure among the rabbis to illustrate dimness of vision. If they wished to denote direct and clear vision, they spoke of seeing a thing face to face; if they wished to denote uncertain and hazy vision, they spoke of seeing through a glass — that is, through a substance only a little more transparent than our own dimmed glass, through which you can see objects, but cannot tell exactly what they are or who the persons are who are moving. . . . The rabbis, too, had another saying . . . . "Even as a king, who with common people talks through a veil, so that he sees them, but they do not see him, but when his friend comes to speak to him, he removes this veil, so that he might see him face to face, even so did God speak to Moses apparently, and not darkly."[30]

G. G. Findlay, in 1897, missed a crucial Pliny reference and so he assumed that Paul was discussing a poor-quality mirror. "[A]ncient mirrors made of burnished metal — a specialty of [Corinth} — were poor reflectors . . . εσοπτρον = κατοπτρον [esoptron = katoptron]."

That "esoptron equals katoptron" may be specious reasoning. Findlay complains that several other commentators "adopt[ed] the local sense of διά, 'through a mirror' in allusion to the appearance of the imaged object as behind the reflector: but it is the dimness, not the displacement, of the image that [Paul] is thinking of." Findlay's anecdotal knowledge causes him to prefer a mirror (a logical fallacy) wherein he opines that displacement is somehow relevant and that usage of the local sense of *διά* must be wrong. He might have been familiar with Barnes's work in support of darkened glass produced

30. Marcus Dods, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 305–6, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b5421133&seq=317.

more than thirty years before his own work, but Dods's work was later, so he did not see the rabbinical comments.[31]

Twentieth-century opinions regarding the mirror

F. F. Bruce adopted Findlay's opinion about the poor mirror and used the terms *dimly* and *dim* in his commentary. Bruce again copied him by stating that *katoptron* is synonymous with *esoptron*.[32]

N. T. Wright writes,

> Paul wants the Corinthians, above all, to learn to think in terms of God's future and its relation to the present. This, in part, is a matter of getting them to think *Jewishly*, instead of in the pagan thought-forms they tend so easily to lapse into.[33]

He then states, "The second image is of the mirror. Mirrors were made in Corinth."[34] This is the Findlay argument. That mirrors were made in Corinth in no way demands that mirrors were being referred to in Paul's writings.

Thomas R. Schreiner has little more to offer. He also uses the mirror imagery.[35] As pointed out above, the early commentators seem to have overlooked Pliny's comments on obsidian and glass. Apart from Marcus Dods, the Jewish connection was lost. The idea of those who were interpreting Paul's glass as something to look through has disappeared from commentaries. The commentators above are in chronological order, though that may have little to do with the ultimate outcome of the glass versus mirror debate. In the end, the mirrors won

31. G. G. Findlay, "St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians," in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 2 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), 901, archive.org/details/expositorsgreekt02nico/page/900/mode/2up and babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101075386480&seq=901.
32. F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 128–29, archive.org/details/12corinthians0000bruc/page/128/mode/2up?view=theater. On p. 193, Bruce again follows Findlay by stating that *katoptron* in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is synonymous with *esoptron* in 1 Corinthians 13:12.
33. N. T. Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 121.
34. Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone*, 122.
35. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 281–82.

out. The New King James Version of 1 Corinthians 13:12 reads, "For now we see in a *mirror*, dimly, but then face to face" (emphasis added).

Those commentators who equate *esoptron* with *katoptron* may not be correct. The problem lies in them claiming these are terms for *mirror*. *Esoptron* is more likely a term for *glass*. Compare James 1:23, "a man beholding his natural face in a glass." James is discussing a mirror. Paul, while using the same word, appears to be describing a different function. Paul uses both — while discussing glass (*ἔσοπτρον*) in 1 Corinthians 13:12 and then using the other (*κάτοπτρον*) in 2 Corinthians 3:18. One has to question why Paul would use two obscure words if they meant precisely the same thing. I believe that esoptron (glass?) was used in a profane, worldly context in viewing the sun whereas katoptron (crystal?) was being used in a sacred context in looking upon God. This accords with Paul's Jewish heritage.

That doesn't complete the challenge that these early commentators had. Not only did they not demonstrate knowledge of obsidian and darkened glass, but they could also not have had knowledge of the solar eclipse passing directly over Israel on 20 May AD 49. A century would pass after Findlay's commentary before that critical piece of information would be available from NASA. The issue appears to be that the commentators did not sufficiently investigate what Paul, a Jew who recognized the Messiah, could mean by the darkened glass statement.

Over the years, commentators have drifted toward the view that Paul was talking about a mirror. It may well be that this was done without considering additional information unavailable to the commentators in the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately, some versions of 1 Corinthians 13:12 have changed the word *glass* to *mirror*, which destroys the typology of experiencing God through a veil. See, for example, the following Bible editions:

- American Standard Version: For now we see in a mirror, darkly;
- English Standard Version: For now we see in a mirror dimly,
- New International Version: For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror;
- New King James Version: For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
- New Living Translation: Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror.

Paul's message aligns the glass to a veil rather than a mirror, draws

comparisons to Moses in 2 Corinthians 3:12–18, and agrees with rabbinical thought. This new information may clarify the meaning of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and change the perceived meaning of a couple of obscure Koine Greek words.

Summary and Conclusion

Having personally witnessed the solar eclipse that travelled across the United States on 21 August 2017 and viewing it through a dark filter, I wondered if Paul had also seen one and used darkened glass to protect his eyes. I was surprised to discover that Paul had an opportunity to experience a ring-of-fire eclipse just a few years before writing 1 Corinthians. Indeed, the whole of the Mediterranean world witnessed that eclipse on 20 May AD 49.

Paul being blinded on the road to Damascus left an imprint on his letters to the Corinthians. The Corinthians would have seen a partial eclipse and would have been aware of the ring of fire in 49 AD. When Paul spoke of darkened glass in 1 Corinthians 13:12, his audience could relate that glass to both obsidian and the other colored glass common within the Roman empire. Moreover, Paul pulled from the traditions of the Jews in equating the glass to the veil in the temple. And so, his argument was that, for now, we cannot abide the full glory of God (or his complete knowledge), but that someday we will be able to see the Lord face to face and comprehend the full brightness of his glory.

Charles E. Dike *joined the Navy to see the world and joined the Church just as he was being discharged after six years of active service. He attended BYU and received a BSEE in 1977, then while raising a family, completed an MSEE degree (1984). He spent roughly thirty-five years in design and research of integrated circuits. Much of his later work entailed on-chip security for microprocessors. He retired in 2014 and has been exploring technical details in scriptures since then with his primary focus on the Book of Mormon.*

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