SECRETS OF REVELATION
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PREFACE: A Strange Book</strong></td>
<td>Revelation 1:1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION: “He Is Coming”</strong></td>
<td>Revelation 1:4-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART ONE: STORMS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Open Letter to the Churches</td>
<td>Revelation 1:11-3:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Christian Jihad</td>
<td>Revelation 4–8:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Shofars of Death</td>
<td>Revelation 8:2–11:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART TWO: THE SKY IS RED</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Devil and the Woman</td>
<td>Revelation 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Of Men and Beasts</td>
<td>Revelation 13–14:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Screaming Angels</td>
<td>Revelation 14:6-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART THREE: NEWS FROM THE EAST</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The World Cups</td>
<td>Revelation 15-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Star Wars</td>
<td>Revelation 19; 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Golden Jerusalem</td>
<td>Revelation 21–22:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: “I Am Coming”</td>
<td>Revelation 22:6-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To my daughter Abigail,
who shared the burden of the Word,
and the light of the vision.
The Mishnah tells the story of four famous sages who entered the Pardes, the mystical paradise of the apocalyptic vision. No one survived the visit, however. The first died right away, the second lost his faith, and the third became demented. As for the fourth . . . he proclaimed himself the Messiah.

This parable brings us—with a smile—an important warning: the concept of the apocalypse is, indeed, a dangerous one. It has an aura of death, doom, and fear about it. At times the fear has become so paralyzing that some cannot even bear to think about it. Someone once said that “either the apocalypse finds a man mad, or it leaves him mad.” From David Koresh in the United States, Shoko Asahara in Japan, and Luc Jouret in Europe—to all these “mystics” who still rush to Jerusalem to find the Messiah or to be one—the concept of apocalypse has inspired many mad men and even greater delirium.

Before we venture into the biblical book of Apocalypse, we need, therefore, to prepare ourselves and make sure that we will read it and understand it the way God meant it to be. For that purpose, the first three verses indicate the nature of the book and serve as guidelines as to how we should approach it—and enjoy it and survive.

First of all, the author is a Jew himself. His Hebrew name Yohanan (Y H W H is gracious) was relatively common among his people. It ap-
pears in biblical times, and Flavius Josephus mentions 17 different men with the name. It is also the name of famous ancient rabbis such as Yohanan ben Zakkai (first century) or Yohanan the Sandal Maker (second century). Our Yohanan is probably the same person who wrote the Gospel of John, Yohanan ben Zebedeh, James’s brother and Jesus’ (or Yeshua’s) beloved disciple. Christian tradition is unanimous on this matter. Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus (130-196 C.E.), clearly attests to Yohanan’s presence in Ephesus, which might explain the author’s particular concern with the church of Ephesus and Asia.4 The author of the Apocalypse is real. The place where he was, “Patmos,” was a small island of 16 square miles surrounded by the Aegean Sea (the word “sea,” thalassa in Greek, appears 25 times in the Apocalypse). According to tradition, Domitian, the first emperor (81-96 C.E.) who took his own divinity seriously and requested that his people adore him as God, exiled Yohanan there and sentenced him to hard labor in the quarries. The Jews and Christians, whom he called “these atheists” since they refused him the honor of deity, particularly annoyed him. According to Jerome,5 the Romans deported Yohanan 14 years after the persecution of Nero (94 C.E.) and liberated him two years later upon the death of Domitian (96 C.E.). Such deportation was common under the Roman regime, and usually involved political figures. The prisoners lost all their civil and property rights. In the introduction to the Apocalypse, Yohanan identifies himself as a witness, a “martus” (Rev. 1:2), who was “suffering” and “was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God” (verse 9). Uprooted from his past, his family, friends, abode, and familiar surroundings; crushed from hard work and humiliation; having nothing left but hope, the author of the Apocalypse was then a “martyr” who achieved Kiddush ha-Shem (sanctification of the name) in the perfect manner of Jewish tradition. And his nostalgia for his homeland and the daily confrontations with his oppressors served only to enhance Yohanan’s Jewish identity.

A Hebrew Book
The Apocalypse is, therefore, more Hebrew than any other book of the New Testament. It contains more than 2,000 allusions to the
Hebrew Scriptures, including 400 explicit references and 90 literal citations of the Pentateuch and the Prophets. With regard to textual citations, the Apocalypse is more faithful to the original Hebrew than to its Greek translation, the Septuagint. Ernest Renan observed that “the language of the Apocalypse is traced from the Hebrew, thought in Hebrew, and can hardly be understood by those who do not know Hebrew.” Ernest Renan observed that “the language of the Apocalypse is traced from the Hebrew, thought in Hebrew, and can hardly be understood by those who do not know Hebrew.” This characteristic invites us to consider the book’s Hebrew background and perspective. To understand the Apocalypse, we must read it in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the main perspective of the present commentary. As we seek to find the author’s intentions, we will analyze the references to the Hebrew Scriptures in their own Hebrew and Jewish contexts. Our interpretation of the Apocalypse will then include not only a direct exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures when necessary, but will also take into consideration the specific Jewish world and traditions that the book reflects.

A Revealed Secret

From the very beginning the book is rooted in the “secrets of Daniel.” Even the first word, “revelation,” puts us in the presence of a secret about to be revealed. “Revelation,” or “apocalypse,” comes from the Greek apokalupto, “to reveal a secret.” This verb “reveal” happens also to be one of the key words of the book of Daniel (glh), in which it occurs seven times. Like the first word of the Apocalypse, it too introduces prophetic visions and is associated with the word “secret” (razah). This echo of the book of Daniel in the first word of the Apocalypse suggests a special connection between the two prophetic works. The “revelations of Yohanan” refer us back to the “secrets of Daniel.”

Moreover, the Apocalypse begins with a beatitude that echoes the last beatitude of the book of Daniel: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). Daniel declared: “Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days. As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to
receive your allotted inheritance” (Dan. 12:12, 13).  

From the very first, the author of the Apocalypse places himself in the same perspective as the prophecy of Daniel, as hinted at by the title “Revelation” and the first beatitude that introduces the book and orients its reader. The Apocalypse alludes more to the book of Daniel than any other portion of the Hebrew Scriptures. Even the technical expression “I Yohanan,” which the prophet uses to introduce his vision, echoes the “I Daniel” of the Old Testament book. Both books have similar phraseology. And both have the same visions, the same themes, the same ethical implications, and the same prophetic perspective covering the same time span.

The similarities between the book of Daniel and the Apocalypse offer our first clues to how we should read the latter book. The references to the book of Daniel guide us as we attempt to interpret the Apocalypse. I recommend all to read the book of Daniel and my commentary Secrets of Daniel as background for the way the Apocalypse employs its themes and allusions.

Also, the beatitude that introduces the Apocalypse suggests from the outset the methodology that should characterize any approach to this book. The passage divides into three verbs: “read,” “hear,” and “take to heart” (or “keep”).

The book first summons us to read. “Blessed is the one who reads.” The blessedness emerges from a revelation, “a revealed secret,” an Apocalypse. The beatitude suggests that happiness implies the need for a revelation. Otherwise we could miss the point. In fact, the nature of the reading of this book is essentially religious. Interestingly, the verb “to read” is the only one in the singular form: “he who reads.” The other verbs are in the plural form: “those who hear,” “those who keep.” The reader has an audience—he is not alone. The words he reads must be heard by the multitude—“those who hear,” according to the liturgical practice of the synagogue. We are in the sacred context of corporate worship. The Apocalypse is to be read as a liturgy; as an emotional and mystical experience; as poetry, with its rhythms, symbols, and spiritual lessons.

But the Apocalypse is much more than a liturgical exercise. Scripture calls its words “prophecy.” Dealing with more than emo-
tions, the book does not just address mystics and poets. Indeed, its words resonate far beyond the walls of the temple, far beyond the premises of the worship service. More than a liturgy, the Apocalypse is a book its audience must study and understand. But this approach requires intellectual effort. We have to “hear” the prophecy, which means in the context of Hebrew thinking, that we have to understand it (1 Kings. 3:9; Neh. 8:3; Jer. 6:10; Rev. 2:7; 3:22). Only then will it “reveal secrets” and illuminate the tormented course of history up to its ultimate fulfillment, as suggested in the last words of the beatitude: “because the time is near” (historicoprophetic approach). The Hebrew conception of “hearing” also implies a willingness to live up to what one has understood. The Shema Israel (Deut. 6:4-9) is more than a pleasant melody to enjoy. In Hebrew, the verb “to hear” (to listen, to understand) is synonymous with the verbs “to keep” and “to obey.” This is precisely the message of the last words of our passage: “Blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.” Beyond the liturgical reading that sings to our ears and the prophecy that challenges our minds, the book aims to lead us to surrender our lives to God, to make them in tune with “what is written in it” (existential approach). The beatitude points then to the first words of the book, identifying the written message as a revelation from above, “the revelation . . . which God gave” (Rev. 1:1). We should understand the “revelation of Yohanan” (the earliest title of the book)\(^\text{15}\) as a revelation to Yohanan. The Apocalypse is thus divine truth in the flesh of the written word, calling for the painful effort of passionately and religiously searching for the meaning of the text (exegetical approach).

**A Menorah Structure**

This multiplicity of approaches we should use to study the Apocalypse we find already hinted at by the very structure—what I call the menorah, or sevenfold pattern—that supports the whole book (see the Menorah table, p.14). The structure of the Apocalypse has the following characteristics:

1. It unwinds in seven cycles of visions, parallel and simultaneous, not unlike the book of Daniel,\(^\text{16}\) in chiasic form (from the
Greek letter chi, having the form of an X), meaning that the second half of the cycle is the inverse parallel of the first (ABC/C'B'A').

2. At the beginning of each of the seven cycles the vision returns to the temple with a liturgical note that alludes to the calendar of Israel's high holy days (as prescribed by Leviticus 23). The book thus places each prophetic cycle within the perspective of a Jewish festival, one often alluded to within the cycle itself. The author invites us to read the Apocalypse in the light of the Jewish festivals, rituals that shed symbolic meaning on history.

The Menorah Form of the Apocalypse

Earthly Phase (1-11:18) Final Phase (11:9-14) Heavenly Phase (15-22)
3. Moreover, as in the book of Daniel, the Apocalypse divides into two main sections (historical/terrestrial and eschatological/celestial), at the middle of which appears God’s judgment during the end of times and the return of the Son of man (Rev. 14; cf. Dan. 7). The first part of the Apocalypse is primarily a prophetic vision of history from the time of Yohanan’s life to the coming of God, while the second part deals with the epoch from the coming of God to the descent of the heavenly city. Instead of interpreting the Apocalypse as a mere reflection of the contemporary events of its author (preterist interpretation), we would rather interpret it according to his own perspective, as a vision of things to come (historicoprophetic interpretation), with all the risks of faith and responsibility that such a reading entails (existential approach). This “historicoprophetic interpretation” is not only the one most faithful to the author’s intentions, but is also the most ancient interpretation.

The book gradually expands, develops, and intensifies its apocalyptic themes. Yohanan here follows the example of Daniel, who repeated and expanded his visions (see especially Daniel 2, 7, and 8). The “revelations of Yohanan” are also one single revelation. The title Apocalypsis implies both a singular and a plural. Our interpretation of the visions should, therefore, take into consideration this literary feature of repetition and intensification (recapitulatory interpretation). Such an interpretation obviously challenges a chronological understanding of the Apocalypse that sees the events predicted by the seals as following those predicted by the letters; those predicted by the shofars after the seals, and so on (futurist and dispensationalist interpretation).

All these preliminary observations about the nature, purpose, and form of the Apocalypse indicate that this mysterious book was not designed to be frightening and strange, but instead a clear revelation to answer our questions and soothe our fears about the future.

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1 Hag. 14b; cf. TJ Hag. 2:1, 77b.
3 Jer. 40:16; Eze. 8:12; Neh. 12:23; 1 Chron. 3:15; etc.
7 The word “apocalypse” has given its name to an important literary trend, both in the Jewish and in the Christian traditions, and applies to both biblical and nonbiblical sources. In the Hebrew Scriptures, examples include Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and some parts of Isaiah, etc.; in the New Testament we find the genre in Matthew 24; Mark 13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 51-53. Outside of the Bible (apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings), we classify the Jewish writings 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 4 Ezra (2 Esdras 3-14), 2 Baruch, the Ascension of Moses, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Apocalypse of Adam, the Apocalypse of Elijah, the book of Jubilees, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and some texts of the Dead Sea manuscripts as apocalyptic. Among Christian writings, we consider the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Apocalypse of Isaiah, etc., as apocalyptic. We must, however, remark that the classification of the above works as “apocalyptic” remains arbitrary and artificial. Moreover, the Apocalypse retains certain characteristics that differentiate it from the other “apocalyptic” writings (its prophetic intention, its ethical implications, its optimism, its author [whose name is not a pseudonym from a more illustrious predecessor], etc.).
8 Dan. 2:19, 22, 28, 29, 30, 47; 10:1.
12 The book of Daniel employs the expression seven times to introduce the apocalyptic visions (Dan. 7:15; 28; 8:15, 27; 9:2; 10:2, 7).
17 The Jewish festivals indicated in the titles shall be in the original Hebrew: Shabbat (the Sabbath), Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), Rosh Hashanah (New Year, or Feast of Trumpets), Kippur (Day of Atonement), Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles).
18 For a similar pattern of the Jewish feasts in the Gospel of John, see George R. Beasley-


20 See Doukhan, Secrets of Daniel, p. 100.

21 The Spanish Jesuit Luis de Alcazar (1554-1614) first introduced this interpretation. In contrast to the Reformers who apply this prophecy to the Papacy, the Jesuit theologian applies it instead to Judaism and to pagan Rome contemporary to Yohanan. German rationalism in the nineteenth century further developed this view, and it paved the way for the historical-critical method.

22 Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202 C.E.) held this interpretation. Born only a few years after the appearance of the Apocalypse, this Church Father was the disciple of Polycarp, a martyr who met Yohanan personally (see Eusebius Church History 5. 20. 6 [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1, pp. 238, 239]). The church, under the influence of Hippoltus and Origen, discarded the perspective during the Middle Ages for a more allegorical, spiritual, and moral interpretation, but it reappeared in the sixteenth century with the Reformers.
The God of Israel

From the book’s very first words of greeting, the author grounds his prophecy in the God of Israel: “From him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). The phrase reminds us of the way God announced Himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14): “I AM WHO I AM.” The God of Israel presents Himself as the God that cannot be captured by, or limited to, a theological definition. He is simply the God “who is” right here in our present. But the God we worship today is the same as that worshiped in ancient Israel. The second verb, “who was,” reminds us that He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet He “is” in the present just as He “was” in the past and will more than just “be” in the future. Instead of using the existential verb “to be” for the future, Yohanan changes the verb, switching from the verb “to be” (conjugated in the past and present tenses) to the verb “to come.” Indeed, God exists. But in spite of all the knowledge we have acquired about Him, and of all that we have experienced as He intervenes in history, He remains ever remote, because He has not yet come. Only the future holds the promise of His coming. The future holds out to us much more than the past and the present. More than the God of memory, more than the God of existence, of spirituality, and of communion, He is the God “who is to come.”

The book further confirms its message by a reference to the
Spirit “before his throne” (Rev. 1:4). The predictions of the Apocalypse are not the product of some astrological or psychic reading. They are certain because they proceed from the throne of God, from the sovereign Judge of the universe, who knows all things.

When the prophet Isaiah enumerates the seven Spirits that are to crown the Messiah, he does so to illustrate the Messiah’s clear and just judgment that will precede the establishment of the kingdom of God: “He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears. . . . The wolf will live with the lamb. . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isa. 11:3-9).

As the Spirit from above reveals the secrets of the salvation and judgment of the world, the book defines itself once more as an Apocalypse—an unveiling. The prophet’s words then take on a warmer, more intimate tone as he declares that such secrets come “from Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:5). Johanan describes three attributes of Christ (“faithful witness,” “firstborn from the dead,” and “ruler of the kings of the earth” [verse 5]) that are related to three actions (“him who loves us,” “has freed us,” and “has made us to be a kingdom” [verse 6]).

The three attributes of Yeshua allude to the three main stages of salvation: (1) His incarnation, as a witness for God among humanity; (2) His death, which saves us, and His resurrection; and finally (3) His royalty, which guarantees our citizenship in His kingdom.

The apostle Paul, as he reflected upon the Resurrection, described the same three stages: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father. . . . For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:20-25). And we have the same thematic progression in Peter’s address to the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-25; cf. Acts 7:56).

The whole plan of salvation, as understood by the early Jewish Christians, serves as a prelude to the prophecy. The God who comes is none other than the Messiah Himself. But the prophecy holds more than just the good news of deliverance. We do not wait merely for an event, but also for a person whom we love and whom we know,
and who loves and knows us. This personal relationship makes the
wait all the more intense.

The first prophecy the Apocalypse presents is that of the
Messiah’s coming. The book depicts the Messiah as He was in the
book of Daniel: “He is coming with the clouds” (Rev. 1:7; cf. Dan.
7:13). The expression seems far-fetched and has at times elicited
smiles and even sneers. Some have thought it well to interpret it in
a spiritual sense, as God inhabiting one’s heart and soul. Others have
understood it as being little more than mythology. Yet clearly the
prophet has in mind something quite real as he goes on to state:
“Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him” (R ev. 1:7).
The text here refers to a prophecy pronounced by Zechariah: “They
will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for
him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as
one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem
will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of
Megiddo” (Zech. 12:10, 11).

The allusion to Zechariah evokes the idea and imagery of weeping
and mourning. Facing “a kingdom and priests” (R ev. 1:6), those
who passionately wait for the coming of the Messiah from above,
Yohanan sets up another camp—“the kings of the earth,” who rely
only on immediate and tangible earthly powers. It includes not only
the Romans who drove in the nails and saw Him die with their own
eyes, but also those who indirectly contributed to His death: the
priests jealous of His popularity; the “Christian” disciples who cow-
ardly kept silent; and ultimately the whole crowd of men and women
who, through the ages, have in one way or another participated in
His murder. Yohanan predicts that they will be disappointed. Instead
of becoming kings and inheriting eternal life, they will mourn for
Him, not because He will actually die, but because at His coming
they will then realize the extent of their misjudgment. Scripture com-
pares their sorrow with that deep emotion we have when a loved one
dies. It is indeed an ironic note. The one they had wished dead—the
one they actually murdered—they now mourn even though they will
see with their own eyes that He is no longer dead.

A liturgical response confirms that the Messiah will return: “So
shall it be! Amen” (verse 7). The words seem to proceed directly from the mouth of the pierced, and it is He who now speaks: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’” (verse 8). He is the “Lord God,” the Y H W H Elohim of Creation (Gen. 2), the God of both the beginning and end of time; “the Alpha and the Omega” (the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet); the one “who is, and who was” and especially the one “who is to come”; and “the Almighty,” the El Shaddai.

This last name is one of the most ancient names for God in the Hebrew tradition. Israel would come to remember Him, the God of the patriarchs, as the God of promises and blessings (Gen. 28:3; 35:11).

Shabbat

Yohanan receives his vision on the “Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). Most Christian readers think immediately of Sunday, forgetting that the writer is Jewish, nourished by the Hebrew Scriptures and steeped in the tradition of his ancestors. Moreover, history does not begin to refer to the “Lord’s Day” as Sunday until the second century C.E. Thus it is more plausible to think of the “Lord’s Day” as the Sabbath day, also called a day “to the Lord” in the Hebrew Scriptures (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). Moreover, the frequent use of the number 7 in the Apocalypse justifies our allusion to the Sabbath day as the opening festival of the book. Furthermore, the Sabbath introduces the yearly cycle of festivals outlined in Leviticus 23: “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord” (Lev. 23:3).

According to biblical tradition, the Sabbath was the first festival of God that humanity observed (Gen. 2:1-3). It was also the only day God sanctified before He gave the commandments at Sinai (Ex. 16:23, 29), and the only day that does not depend on the seasons, the movements of an astronomical body, or any historical event. Thus it is perfectly natural to begin with the Sabbath.

It is likewise highly probable that Yohanan is alluding to the other “Day of the Lord,” the Yom Y H W H of the ancient Hebrew
prophets (Isa. 13:9-13; Eze. 30:1-5; Joel 2:1-11; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:14-18; etc.), the day of judgment and the day of His coming at the end of times. The eschatological context of our passage confirms such an interpretation.

In other words, Yohanan received his vision about the day of the Lord (day of the final judgment and of the Parousia) during the Sabbath day (the other day of the Lord). That the prophet has associated the two days is not unusual. The Sabbath has always had eschatological overtones in the Bible (Isa. 58:14; 61:1-3), as well as in Jewish tradition, which understands the Sabbath as the sign of the day of deliverance and “the foretaste of the World-to-come.”

Suddenly Yohanan hears a loud voice behind him (Rev. 1:10). Hebrew thought situates the past “before” one’s eyes, because it is spread out in front of our perception, while the future is yet to happen and consequently comes from behind us. Thus by implication the loud voice represents the future.

For Yohanan, the voice sounds near, familiar. It is the voice of the Messiah he knew personally and whom he loved, the voice of the resurrected Yeshua of the present. But it is also a voice that arrives from far away, from the future—the voice of the God who is coming.

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1 Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 17. 5.
2 The Hebrew word qedem, meaning “before,” designates what has already taken place, the past; the Hebrew word ahar, meaning “behind,” indicates what comes after, the future. In contrast, modern Westerners tend to see the past as behind and the future as ahead. On this notion, see Thorleif Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek (New York: reprint 1970), pp. 149, 150.