

THEMES IN  
BIBLICAL NARRATIVE  
JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

*Editorial Board*

GEORGE H. VAN KOOTEN, Groningen  
ROBERT A. KUGLER, Portland, Oregon  
LOREN T. STUCKENBRUCK, Durham

*Assistant Editor*

FREEK VAN DER STEEN

*Advisory Board*

REINHARD FELDMIEIER, Göttingen – JUDITH LIEU, Cambridge  
FLORENTINO GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ, Groningen-Leuven  
HINDY NAJMAN, Toronto  
MARTTI NISSINEN, Helsinki – ED NOORT, Groningen

VOLUME 12

The Significance of Sinai

Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in  
Judaism and Christianity

*Edited by*

George J. Brooke, Hindy Najman and  
Loren T. Stuckenbruck

*Editorial Assistance*

Eva Mroczek, Brauna Doidge and Nathalie LaCoste



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON  
2008

## HEARING AND SEEING AT SINAI: INTERPRETIVE TRAJECTORIES

Steven D. Fraade  
Yale University, USA

### 1. *Introduction: The Scriptural Backdrop*

The English term “theophany,” often used of the revelation at Mt. Sinai, is made up of two Greek components, theo- (θεός) and -phany (φαινω), together meaning the “appearance of God,” suggesting that it was an event in which God physically manifested himself in the sight of Israel. As any reader of the biblical account of Sinai is aware, however, the central aspect of the revelation is not of God himself, but of his words, instructions, or commandments. That is not to say that the Sinaitic revelation is without fantastic visual effects (as any viewer of the classic movie, “The Ten Commandments,” can attest), but rather that at the center of the revelation is not the appearance of God, but the giving and receiving of his words. Whether they are directly, divinely conveyed or indirectly, humanly meditated,<sup>1</sup> they are not just to be recorded, but to be *heard* by the whole people, at Sinai and in the successive loci of revelation. God is revealed through the revelation of his Torah, Sinai becoming identified, in rabbinic parlance, with מתן תורה (the “giving of Torah”). As some of our earliest rabbinic midrashim awkwardly express this idea, כשנגלה הקב"ה ליתן תורה לישראל... translated literally, “When the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to give Torah to Israel...”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, auditory and ocular modes of revelatory reception at Sinai both accompany and remain in tension with one another.<sup>3</sup> With

<sup>1</sup> See Steven D. Fraade, “Moses and the Commandments: Can Hermeneutics, History, and Rhetoric Be Disentangled?” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. H. Najman and J. H. Newman; JSJSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 399–422.

<sup>2</sup> See *Mek. of R. Shim'on bar Yoḥai* Exod 19:4 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 138); *Sifre Deuteronomy* 314 (ed. Finkelstein, 356); 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 395, 395–96, 397); *Midr. Tanna'im* Deut 32:11; 33:2 (ed. Hoffmann, 192, 209, 210).

<sup>3</sup> While modern critical Bible scholars might attribute these differences to distinct authorial or editorial literary strands, canonical interpreters would seek either to



and they ate and drank”, וַיֵּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נֶדְבַּ וְאַבְיָהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל . . . וְאַל־אֲצִילִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׂתּוּ: (Exod 24:9–11). Medieval rabbinic commentators, feeling uncomfortable with such an explicit instance of visual theophany, seek to explain it away. For example, Ibn Ezra says, “This is not with the seeing of the eye, but [seeing] in the manner of prophecy,” אִין זֶה בְּמִרְאָה הָעֵין, כִּי אִם בְּדֶרֶךְ נְבוּאָה, that is, they did not actually see God with their eyes, but only received a prophetic vision, as did the later prophets.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Maimonides avers that whatever they “saw” was not with the physical sense of sight, but with the intellect.<sup>9</sup> To Rashi, their seeing of God was, indeed, prohibited, but God delayed their punishment to a more propitious time. None of these, however, should be confused with the plain sense of the passage.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Hearing and Seeing in Early Rabbinic and Philonic Interpretations of Sinai

Against this biblical backdrop, we shall look at a few early rabbinic interpretations that conceive of the relation between the hearing and seeing of Sinaitic revelation in striking ways, but with some very interesting antecedents.

Our entry point will be a midrashic set of comments to Exod 20:15 (18), which verse may first be cited in its entirety: וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת: וְאֶת־הַלְפִידִים וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת־הַהָר עָשָׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ מֵרָחֵק, which is translated in the NJPS as: “All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw [it], they fell back and stood at a distance.” Note that a single verb of seeing (רֹאִים), here (as in the NRSV) translated as “witnessed,” governs the thunder, the lightning, the blare of the

horn, and the mountain smoking. Our earliest rabbinic commentary to this verse, comprising two opposing views, is stunningly deceptive in its brevity and seeming simplicity:

“וכל העם רואים את הקולות.” רואין את הנראה ושומעין את הנשמע. דברי רבי ישמעאל. רבי עקיבא אומר. רואין ושומעין את הנראה. (ואין) [רואין]<sup>11</sup> דבר של אש יוצא מפי הגבורה ונחצב על הלוחות. שנאמר “קול” חוצב להבות אש.”<sup>12</sup>

“And all the people saw the thunder”: They saw what was visible and heard what was audible—These are the words of R. Ishmael. R. Akiba says: They saw and heard that which was visible. They saw the fiery word/commandment coming out from the mouth of the Almighty as it was struck upon the tablets, as it is said, “The voice of the Lord hewed out flames of fire” (Ps 29:7).

The biblical textual barb that generates these two interpretations is the use of the verb רָאָה, to see, for that which is audible: thunder. In the present biblical context the word for thunder (קוֹל), is also that for “voice,” in particular, the voice of God (as well as for the blare of the horn).<sup>13</sup> Thus, whereas we might have expected the text to say “they heard the thunder and saw the lightning,” with different verbs for that which is audible and for that which is visible, a *single* verb of seeing is instead employed for *both*. The simplest solution, as expressed in many modern translations, is to understand the verb רָאָה here as denoting not just the physical sense of seeing, but its broader meaning of cognizance and comprehension, allowing it to govern both the thunder and the lightning (as well as the blare of the horn and the smoking mountain).<sup>14</sup> Thus, we may compare, as do ancient exegetes, this use of the verb

<sup>8</sup> Between his “long” and “short” commentaries, Ibn Ezra refers to the following cases of prophetic visions of God: 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chr 18:18; Isa 6:1–5; Ezek 1:1, 26–28; 10:20; Amos 9:1. See also Ps 17:15.

<sup>9</sup> *Guide*, 1.4, 64; also for Exod 33:18.

<sup>10</sup> There is a long prior history to such attempts to avoid the text’s plain sense, beginning already with the Septuagint’s rendering: καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον, οὐ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ . . . καὶ ὤφθησαν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ, “And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood . . . and they appeared in the place of God . . .” There is a similarly (although not equally) long intellectual history, deeply infused with Christian anti-Semitism and Jewish apologetic response, of contrasting the emphasis of “Hellenism” on seeing (and space) with that of “Hebraism” on hearing (and time), and the resulting characterization of Jews and Judaism as being “aniconic.” See especially Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Although וַיֵּרְאוּ is the reading in the best manuscripts (Oxford and Munich), as well as the first printing, רואין and ראו are found in other witnesses, with the former preferred by the Academy of the Hebrew Language data base and the latter (from *Yal. Shimḥoni*) adopted by Lauterbach and Horovitz-Rabin in their editions.

<sup>12</sup> *Mek. Bahodesh* 9 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 235; ed. Lauterbach, 2:266). The text as I have presented it follows mainly MS Oxford, according to the data base of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. For late parallels, see *Pirqe R. El.* 41 (Warsaw, 98a) and *Midr. Samuel* 9:4 (ed. Buber, 74), as well as below, n. 20.

<sup>13</sup> For “קול” as the divine voice, in the immediate context, see Exod 19:5, 19.

<sup>14</sup> For “seeing” as representing all five senses combined, see Ibn Ezra to Exod 5:21; 20:15; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 252. The emphasis on the verb רָאָה also allows for a word play between “seeing” and “fearing” (יָרָא), which verbs in certain forms can be morphologically identical. Thus, וַיֵּרְאוּ הָעָם, “the people saw,” in the latter half of our verse, has been understood to mean “the people feared,” represented by וַיִּרְאוּ in the Samaritan Pentateuch and by φοβηθέντες in the Septuagint. See the use of יָרָא twice in 20:17 (20), as well as above, nn. 6, 7.

with that in Exod 20:19 (22): “You yourselves *saw* that I *spoke* to you from the very heavens,” אתם ראיתם כי מוֹדַבְרָתִי עִמָּכֶם. Thus, returning to Exod 20:15 and our midrash, we may understand R. Ishmael’s interpretation as one that fills out a presumed ellipsis in that verse, whereby seeing is shorthand for hearing and seeing, with the former applying to the audible thunder and the latter to the visible lightning.<sup>15</sup>

The recognition of this elliptical presumption and its exegetical solution is much older than R. Ishmael (early second century C.E.), as evidenced in the version of this verse in the Samaritan Pentateuch (ca. 100 B.C.E.), which both supplies the missing verb of hearing and *reorders* the verse accordingly: וְכָל הָעָם שָׁמַע אֶת הַקּוֹלוֹת וְאֵת הַשּׁוֹפָר וְרָאִים וְאֵת הַלְפִידִים וְאֵת הַהָר עָשָׂן. “The whole people heard the thunder and the blare of the horn, and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain.”<sup>17</sup> Quite plainly, what is auditory is heard and what is visual is seen. Similarly, Josephus, in his “retold” account of revelation (*Ant.* 3.81), in what is certainly an exegetical paraphrase of our verse states: “As for the Hebrews, the sight that they saw and the din that struck their ears sorely disquieted them,” τοὺς γε μὴν Ἑβραίους τὰ τε ὁρώμενα καὶ ὁ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς προσβάλλων ψόφος δεινῶς ἐτάραττεν.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Whether this was in fact the historical Rabbi Ishmael’s understanding or one that was editorially attributed to him is immaterial to my argument.

<sup>16</sup> Avraham Tal, *The Samaritan Pentateuch Edited According to MS 6 (C) of the Shekhem Synagogue* (Texts and Studies in the Hebrew Language and Related Subjects 8; Tel Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1994), 76.

<sup>17</sup> In this particular case, the Samaritan Pentateuch would appear to be an “improvement” to the MT (that is, to its antecedent), rather than an independent witness.

<sup>18</sup> Josephus (or his source) may be dependent on the Septuagint’s rendering of וַיִּרְאוּ (“[the people] saw”) as φοβηθέντες (“feared”), or at least a similar understanding. See above, n. 14. The association of divine speech with fire at Mt. Sinai is also found in Deut 5:20–24, following the Deuteronomistic decalogue, but there it is clear that while the divine voice issues out of fire, the voice itself is to be heard and not seen. For a similar separation of senses, and valorization of hearing, see Deut 4:36. The Book of Deuteronomy, in reworking the Covenant Code (as well as the Priestly document), like the Samaritan Pentateuch and Josephus, removes any confusion caused by the Book of Exodus’s mixing of auditory and visual perceptions. Note especially Deut 4:12: “The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice.” וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלֵיכֶם מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּבָרִים אֲתֶם שֹׁמְעִים וְהַתְמוּנָה אֵינְכֶם רֹאִים וְזוֹלָתִי קוֹל. Although this most likely means that you saw nothing, but only heard a voice (see Ibn Ezra ad loc.; compare 4:15–19), it could be construed to mean that you saw nothing but a voice. This is precisely how Philo interprets the verse in *Migration* 48, treated below. For further discussion of Deut 4’s reworking of the Sinaitic narratives of Exodus (and their traces in Deut 5) so as to eliminate or downplay the ocular experience, see most recently Stephen A. Geller, “Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4,” *Proof* 14 (1994): 103–39; Michael Carasik, “To See a Sound: A Deuteronomistic Rereading

By contrast, Rabbi Akiba’s interpretation<sup>19</sup> applies both faculties of sight and hearing to what is visual, and by implication also to what is audible, refusing a simple division of labor between the two senses. To him, therefore, Scripture’s locution of the people having seen what is normally thought to be audible (thunderings/voices) is to be taken literally, and not to be circumvented as an ellipsis in need of filling, precisely as is done by the Samaritan Pentateuch, Josephus, and some modern translators. Whether to strengthen or to extend this interpretation, he (or an editor) invokes, in truncated form, a tradition that is found in several other exegetical locations in the tannaitic midrashim: what issued from God’s mouth at Sinai were not simply words as sounds, but hypostatized divine utterances in the form of flying flames, that burned themselves into the tablets of the decalogue.<sup>20</sup> While the divine words/commandments at Sinai could be experienced as both sight and sound, in R. Akiba’s extended interpretation the emphasis (following the lemma understood literally) is on their having been seen. This understanding of Exod 20:15 is intertextually secured (or extended) with the citation of Ps 29:7, a Psalm generally associated with Sinai in rabbinic interpretation, wherein God’s voice (קוֹל) is associated with hewing flames. According to this tradition, prior to the divine voice being inscribed as writing, so as to be perpetually read and heard, it enjoys an iconic fiery presence in Israel’s *sight*. Paraphrasing another tannaitic midrash, we might say that the experience of revelation is one of מַרְאֵה

of Exodus 20:15,” *Proof* 19 (1999): 257–76; both of which cite previous scholarship; as well as Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 198–208; idem, *The Anchor Bible: Deuteronomy 1–11. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 204; 212–13. On the Book of Deuteronomy’s favoring of the auditory over the ocular experience at Sinai, see Mark Brettler’s contribution to this volume, especially 24–25.

<sup>19</sup> Whether this was in fact the historical Rabbi Akiba’s interpretation or one that was editorially attributed to him is immaterial to my argument.

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller version of this tradition, in which each word (דְּבַר/דְּבָרִים), upon issuing from God’s mouth, would encircle the whole camp of the Israelites, before being engraved on the tablets, see *Sifre Deuteronomy* 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 399), commenting on Deut 33:2, אֲשַׁדֶּת, “lightning flashing,” or “fiery law” (according to the Masoretic note, dividing the word into two). For fuller treatment, with references to other locations and permutations of this tradition, some of which are even more physical (and erotic), and in which the hypostasization is carried further, see Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 45, 207 nn. 91–92, 224 n. 198. For other texts, see Hans Bietenhard, “Logos-Theologie im Rabbinat: Ein Beitrag zur Lehre vom Worte Gottes im rabbinischen Schrifttum,” *ANRW*, Part 2, *Principal* 19.2 (1979): 580–618.

דיבור, the appearance (viewing) of the divine utterance, rather than one of מראה פנים, the appearance of the divine “face.”<sup>21</sup>

Much the same interpretation of Exod 20:15 (18) is found in the *Mekilta of R. Shim'on bar Yohai* (a prominent student of R. Akiba's), but unattributed:

“את הקולות ואת הלפידים”. בנוהג שבעולם אי אפשר לראות את הקול אבל כן “את הקולות ואת הלפידים”. כשם שראו את הלפידים כך ראו את הקולות. וירא העם. מה ראו כבוד גדול ראו. ר' אליעזר אומר מנין שראתה שפחה בישראל מה שלא ראה גדול שבנביאים. תלמוד לומר “וירא העם”. מה ראו כבוד גדול ראו.<sup>22</sup>

“The thunder and the lightning” (20:15a): Normally it is impossible to see the thunder, but here “[all the people saw] the thunder and the lightning.” Just as they saw the lightning, so too they saw the thunder. “And when the people saw” (20:15b): What did they see? They saw the great glory [of God]. R. Eliezer said: From whence [do we know] that an Israelite maidservant saw that which the greatest of prophets did not see?<sup>23</sup> Scripture says, “And when the people saw”: What did they see? They saw the great glory [of God].<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See *Sifre Numbers* 103 (ed. Horowitz, 101), interpreting Num 12:8 (on God's having communicated with Moses במראה [“visually”], instead of MT ומראה [“plainly”], the former also being evidenced in the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Peshitta, and the targumim) in light of Exod 33:20: “אתה או' זה מראה דיבור. אתה או' במראה.” זה מראה דיבור. או אינו אלא מראה פנים. שנ' בו “וירא את פני” זה מראה דיבור. או אינו אלא מראה פנים. שנ' בו “וירא את פני” “In appearance”: This is the appearance of the divine utterance. You say this is the appearance of the divine utterance. But perhaps it is none other than the appearance of [the divine] face. [This cannot be, since] Scripture teaches in this regard, “But, He said, you cannot see My face, [for man may not see Me and live.]” This is the text chosen by the Academy of the Hebrew Language for its data base, mainly following MS Vatican. However, מראה פנים here follows MS Oxford and *Yal. Shim'oni*, while מראה and other printed editions (beginning with that of Venice, 1526) have שכינה, “the appearance of the divine indwelling,” as does MS London. MS Vatican has מראה followed by מראה alone, presumably a scribal omission. MS Berlin has [דיבור] מראה followed by מראה אלהים, “the appearance of God.” R. Hillel ad loc. explains: “Meaning, that he [Moses] would see and understand the word of the Holy One, blessed be He, meaning, not in the manner of a parable and riddle.” Note also the comment of *Zayit Ra'anan* to *Yal. Shim'oni* (r. 739) on מראה דיבור: “שהיה רואה הקול: מראה דיבור (for he [Moses] would see the voice”).

<sup>22</sup> *Mek. of R. Shim'on bar Yohai* Exod 20:15 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 154–55). For text and translation, see also *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yo'ai* (ed. and trans. W. David Nelson; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 253. The following translation, while consulting Nelson's, is my own.

<sup>23</sup> A similar statement is made, also in the name of R. Eliezer, with regard to the Israelites' visionary experience at the Reed Sea: *Mek. of R. Shim'on bar Yohai* Exod 15:2 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 78).

<sup>24</sup> In the Hebrew of Exod 20:15 (18), there is no direct object to the phrase וירא העם, “and the people saw,” allowing for the present question and for the possibility

Once again, consistent with the view of R. Akiba in the *Mekilta of R. Ishmael*, the visionary experience of Israel at Mt. Sinai was exceptional, in that all of the people saw what is normally only heard. However, here that interpretation of Exod 20:15 is not connected to the tradition of seeing the divine utterances as fire (via Ps 29:7), but to that of seeing the glory of God (via the latter half of Exod 20:15).<sup>25</sup>

Just as we discovered antecedents to R. Ishmael's interpretation in the version of the Samaritan Pentateuch and the paraphrase of Josephus, we will examine antecedents to R. Akiba's understanding of the verse in the writings of Philo of Alexandria (early-mid-first century C.E.).<sup>26</sup> In *Decalogue* 32–49, Philo discusses various aspects of the divine voice at Sinai, contrasting it to the human voice, and repeatedly stressing that the former is seen rather than heard in the normal way of hearing. It warrants citing at length:

[32] The ten words or oracles, in reality laws or statutes, were delivered by the Father of All when the nation, men and women alike, were assembled together. Did He do so by His own utterance in the form of a voice? Surely not; may no such thought ever enter our minds, for God is not as a man needing mouth and tongue and windpipe. [33] I should suppose that God wrought on this occasion a miracle of a truly holy kind by bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments and fitted with perfect harmonies, not soulless, nor yet composed of body and soul like a living creature, but a rational soul full of clearness and distinctness, which giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounded forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest.... [35] But the new miraculous voice was set in action and kept in flame by the power of God which breathed upon it and spread it abroad on every side and made it more illuminating in its ending than in its beginning by creating in the souls of each and all another kind of hearing far superior to the hearing of the ears. For that is but a sluggish sense, inactive until aroused by the impact of the air, but

that the object of their seeing was not just the thunder, as indicated in the first half of the verse, but something else, that being the glory of God (for which, see Exod 24:17). For an alternative understanding of וירא העם, see above, n. 14.

<sup>25</sup> See previous note and above, n. 5.

<sup>26</sup> On Philo's view of revelatory communication at Sinai, see David Winston, “Two Types of Mosaic Prophecy According to Philo,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers* (ed. David J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 448–52; idem, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (The Gustave A. and Mamie W. Efronson Memorial Lectures, 1984; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985); Maren R. Niehoff, “What is in a Name? Philo's Mystical Philosophy of Language,” *JSQ* 2 (1995): 220–52.

the hearing of the mind possessed by God makes the first advance and goes out to meet the spoken words with the keenest rapidity. . . . [46] Then from the midst of the fire that streamed from heaven there sounded forth to their utter amazement a voice, for the flame became articulate speech in the language familiar to the audience, and so clearly and distinctly were the words formed by it that they seemed to see rather than hear them. [47] What I say is vouched for by the law in which it is written, "All the people saw the voice," a phrase fraught with much meaning, for it is the case that the voice of men is audible, but the voice of God truly visible. Why so? Because whatever God says is not words but deeds, which are judged by the eyes rather than the ears. [48] Admirable too, and worthy of the Godhead, is the saying that the voice proceeded from the fire, for the oracles of God have been refined and assayed as gold is by fire. [49] And it conveys too, symbolically, some such meaning as this: since it is the nature of fire both to give light and to burn, those who resolve to be obedient to the divine utterances will live for ever as in unclouded light with the laws themselves as stars illuminating their souls, while all who are rebellious will continue to be burnt, aye and burnt to ashes, by their inward lusts, which like a flame will ravage the whole life of those in whom they dwell.<sup>27</sup>

A similar idea, but expressed more briefly, can be found in Philo's *Migration* 47–49:

[47] For what life is better than a contemplative life, or more appropriate to a rational being? For this reason, whereas the voice of mortal beings is judged by hearing, the sacred oracles intimate that the words of God are seen as light is seen; for we are told that "all the people saw the Voice" (Exod 20:18), not that they heard it; for what was happening was not an impact of air made by the organs of mouth and tongue, but virtue shining with intense brilliance, wholly resembling a fountain of reason, and this is also indicated elsewhere on this wise: "Ye have seen that I have spoken to you out of Heaven" (Exod 20:22), not "ye heard," for the same cause as before. [48] In one place the writer distinguishes things heard from things seen and hearing from sight, saying, "Ye heard a voice of words and saw no similitude but only a voice" (Deut 4:12), making a very subtle

<sup>27</sup> For text and translation (by F. H. Colson), see the LCL 7:20–31. For fire, representing Torah, having the ability both to give light and heat as well as (especially its esoteric teachings) to burn, see *Mek. of R. Ishmael Bahodesh* 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 215; ed. Lauterbach 2:220–21); *Mek. of R. Shim'on bar Yohai* Exod 19:8 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 143–44); *Sifre Deuteronomy* 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 399–400); *m. 'Abot* 2:10; *t. Hag.* 2:5 (ed. Lieberman, 381); *y. Hag.* 2:1 (77a) (ed. Sussmann, col. 782); *b. Hag.* 13a-b; *'Abot R. Nat.* 28 (ed. Schechter, 86); as well as discussion in Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 46–49 (with notes). For the "voice" of revelation not diminishing with distance/time, compare *Mek. of R. Ishmael Bahodesh* 3, 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 214, 216; ed. Lauterbach, 2:218, 223).

distinction, for the voice dividing itself into noun and verb and the parts of speech in general he naturally spoke of as "audible," for it comes to the test of hearing: but the voice or sound that was not that of verbs and nouns but of God, seen by the eye of the soul, he rightly represents as "visible." [49] And after first saying "Ye saw no similitude" he adds "but only a Voice," evidently meaning the reader to supply in thought "which you did see." This shews that words spoken by God are interpreted by the power of sight residing in the soul, whereas those which are divided up among the various parts of speech appeal to hearing.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Philo refers to the tradition of revelation having been seen rather than conventionally heard in *Moses* 2.213 (LCL 6:554–55), where he speaks of "commands promulgated by God not through His prophet but by a voice which, strange paradox, was visible and aroused the eyes rather than the ears of the bystanders."

If R. Akiba is *laconic* in his expression of the tradition that the divine voice issued and was perceived at Sinai in visible fiery form, which only secondarily became audible, Philo is, as we have come to expect, oppositely *loquacious*. They both link this shared understanding of the visual perception of revelation to the words of Exod 20:15 (18), although employing different inter-texts in so doing (Ps 29:7 for R. Akiba; Exod 20:19 [22] and Deut 4:12 for Philo). Whether they simply come to a common understanding of the same verse independently, or whether they draw on a shared tradition of interpretation is impossible to know for certain. However, in the present case, I think that strong credence can be given to the latter assumption of a shared exegetical tradition, even though they are relating to the same scriptural words in different languages (Hebrew for R. Akiba and Greek for Philo). Undoubtedly, the fact that the Septuagint renders קולות for "thunder" with τὴν φωνήν, the same Greek word used for the קול (blare) of the horn and the קול (voice) of God is critical to Philo's interpretation, as is the use of קולות for thunder to R. Akiba's interpretation. However, it should be emphasized that R. Akiba's interpretation in the *Mekilta* appears as part of an ongoing commentary to the Book of Exodus, to which his is one of several comments to Exod 20:15 (18); whereas Philo's appears within thematic treatises, within which he cites Exod 20:15 (18) for support of his argument. Of course, that tells us nothing of how each of these interpretations first arose (that is, whether or not from exegetical contemplation of the verse in its scriptural context), but it does tell us

<sup>28</sup> For text and translation (by F. H. Colson), see the LCL 4:158–59.

something about how their respective interpretations are rhetorically presented for their respective audiences' consumption.

Nevertheless, there are several components of Philo's interpretation that are not expressed in R. Akiba's interpretation and which are uniquely or at least characteristically Philonic, needing to be understood in terms of Philo's particular historical/cultural context and ideological/rhetorical program. To begin with, Philo repeatedly stresses that divine speech is unlike human speech, something for which there is rabbinic evidence as well (notwithstanding the dictum attributed to R. Ishmael that, *דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם*, "The Torah speaks in human language").<sup>29</sup> But more broadly, Philo repeatedly emphasizes the superiority of sight over hearing, or at least over normal physical hearing. This emphasis needs to be understood in relation to a broader Platonic deprecation of the physical senses (in comparison to the faculties of the intellect), among which, however, sight is elevated above hearing.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Philo stresses that the divine "voice" at Sinai was miraculous (and paradoxical), unlike any other voice, in that in issuing from fire, it was more of light than of sound, or at least, a unique sort of sound that issued not from the physical processes that normally produce or receive sound, but from a divine effulgence. Thus, to the extent that revelation was heard at Sinai, it was the "hearing of the mind possessed by God," and not by the physical organ of the

ear. Similarly, to the extent that the language of revelation is comprehensible to humans, it was not produced in the same way that human speech is normally produced and heard.<sup>31</sup> Finally, it should be stressed that Philo *uniquely* understands Deut 4:12, which is never rabbinically adduced in this connection,<sup>32</sup> to denote *two* types of voices/speech: the human/grammatica, which is (merely) heard, and the divine, which is "seen by the eye of the soul."<sup>33</sup>

We shall now consider one final passage from the *Mekilta's* commentary on the Book of Exodus's account of the revelation at Sinai, which will suggest that Philonic and the early rabbinic interpretation share other interpretive moves, notwithstanding their very different historical/cultural contexts and ideological/rhetorical programs. Coming to Exod 20:19 (22), which was cited by Philo in conjunction with Exod 20:15 (18), the *Mek. of R. Ishmael Bahodesh* 9, comments:

"אתם ראיתם". הפרש בין שאדם ראה בין שאחרים משיחין לו. שכשאחרים משיחין לו פעמים שליבו חלוק. אבל כן [אתם ראיתם וגו'. רבי נתן אומר]. אתם ראיתם למה נאמר. לפי שהוא אומר "יודוך יי כל נלכי ארץ כי שמעו אמרי פיך". יכול כשם ששמעו כך ראו. תלמוד לומר אתם ראיתם. לא ראו אומות העולם.<sup>34</sup>

"You yourselves have seen [that I spoke to you from the heavens]": There is a difference between what a person sees and what others tell him. For regarding what others tell him he may have doubts in his mind [concerning its veracity]. Here, however, "You yourselves have seen." R. Nathan (ca. 200 c.E.) says: "You yourselves have seen": Why is it said? Since it says, "All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words you spoke" (Ps 138:4). One might think that just as they heard, so too they saw. Therefore, Scripture says, "You yourselves have seen": The nations of the world have not seen.

<sup>29</sup> For the earliest attestations of this dictum, see *Sifre Numbers* 112 (ed. Horowitz, 121); *Sifra Qedoshim parashah* 10:1 (ed. Weiss, 91b); in only the first of which is the saying attributed to R. Ishmael. The saying is much more frequently evidenced in the Babylonian Talmud (32 times) and in the aggadic midrashim (38 times), in only some of which is it attributed to R. Ishmael. For the rabbinic differentiation of divine speech from human, the *locus classicus* is the interpretation of Ps 62:12 and Jer 23:29 in *Sifre Numbers* 102 (ed. Horowitz, 100); *y. Ned.* 3:2 (37d) (ed. Sussmann, col. 1025); *b. Sanh.* 34a; *b. Shabb.* 88b. For the most recent discussion, see Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 69–79.

<sup>30</sup> See also Philo, *Sacrifices* 78 (LCL 2:153): "But when, unforeseen and un hoped for, the sudden beam of self-inspired wisdom has shone upon us, when that wisdom has opened the closed eye of the soul and made us spectators rather than hearers of knowledge, and substituted in our minds sight, the swiftest of senses, for the slower sense of hearing, then it is idle any longer to exercise the ear with words." Similarly, *Contempl. Life* 10–13 (LCL 9:119): "...the most vital of senses, sight. And by this I do not mean the sight of the body but of the soul, the sight which alone gives a knowledge of truth and falsehood" (10). Compare Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 75 (381B) (LCL 5:172–75): "[The crocodile] is declared to be a living representation of God, since he is the only creature without a tongue; for the Divine Word has no need of a voice, and through noiseless ways advancing, guides by Justice all affairs of moral men" (adapting Euripides, *Troades* 887–88; cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 1007C).

<sup>31</sup> Compare above, n. 29.

<sup>32</sup> The closest is the early medieval *Midr. Leqah Tov* ad loc. (ed. Buber, 14), which connects the verse to the tradition of the divine voice having encircled the Israelite camp at Sinai (see above, n. 20), but without any of the visual associations. Elsewhere, however, the verse is understood to *preclude* the seeing of God (or his voice), which is how the verse is usually understood: *Pesiq. Rab Kah.*, supplement 7 (ed. Mandelbaum, 471); *Tanh. Ha'azinu* 4. In Ezra ad loc. See above, n. 18.

<sup>33</sup> This text is important to Daniel Boyarin (*Border Lines: The Partition of Judaism-Christianity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], 114) in arguing for a Jewish "logos theology" that is both "pre- and pararabbinic." However, Boyarin fails to indicate its comparative and contrastive intersections with early rabbinic midrash.

<sup>34</sup> The text as I have presented it follows mainly MS Oxford, according to the data base of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. The text within square brackets is from MS Munich. Its absence from MS Oxford most likely represents a scribal error of homoteleuton. For critical printed editions, see Horowitz-Rabin, 238; Lauterbach, 275.



This interpretation shares with Philo the view that seeing is superior to hearing, although here the comparison is between one's own seeing and hearing from others. Both Philo and the *Mekilta* employ Exod 20:19 (22) to valorize Israel's receiving of God's revelation at Sinai via sight rather than normal hearing. However, in Philo's use of the verse to illustrate the superiority of seeing over hearing, it is not clear whether he intends a polemical argument: superiority over whose hearing? He may be saying that Israel's revelatory knowledge (and attainment of reason and virtue) is superior to that which is not based on visual (mystical?) experience, but merely on oral transmission, e.g., that of the non-Jewish philosophers. If that is his intent, he does not explicitly express it. Alternatively, Philo may simply be making a philosophical argument, buttressed by scriptural citations, that would have resonated well with an educated audience, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. However, by grounding his philosophical argument in Jewish scriptures, Philo may implicitly be claiming a privileged status for those scriptures as the ultimate source of philosophical wisdom.

The *Mekilta's* interpretive argument is two-fold, with both parts of the argument being grounded in the word **אתם** ("you"), which word is not strictly required by Hebrew syntax, and therefore must bear particular meaning.<sup>35</sup> The opening anonymous interpretation stresses the superiority of first-hand seeing (**אתם ראים**) to second-hand hearing (**אחרים משיחין**), since the latter is potentially suspect. The second half of the argument, attributed to R. Natan, has a different emphasis, even though it is based in the same regard for **אתם** as being non-superfluous: "You yourselves (and no others) have seen. . . ." This becomes manifest through the citation of the intertext from Psalms, which might be understood (were it not for Exod 20:19 [22]) to be an expression of the *universal* receiving of divine revelation: all of the nations have "heard the words You spoke."<sup>36</sup> Having heard, perhaps they also saw. Our verse comes to assert that whatever the nations have heard, it is nothing compared to what Israel *alone* has seen. Israel enjoys an *exclusive* revelatory intimacy

with God, based on unmediated seeing that is not shared by the nations, however much they may claim to have heard God's words.

Although, once again, Philo and the *Mekilta* employ the same scriptural verse to affirm the superiority of seeing over hearing as modes of revelatory reception, and may be responding to the same scriptural barb ("You yourselves have seen [rather than heard] that. . . I spoke with you"), they do so in very different rhetorical manners, suggesting that their exegetical programs thereby reflect their very different historical/cultural contexts and ideological/rhetorical programs. Neither should the exegetical similarities cause us to lose sight of the rhetorical and structural differences, nor should those differences cause us to lose sight of the exegetical similarities.

### 3. *Revelatory Seeing and the Practice of Rabbinic Midrash*

Next we shall examine two rabbinic midrashic passages in which the visualization of the revelatory word or revealer plays an important role in authorizing and valorizing specifically rabbinic modes of discourse and interpretation. The first is from *Sifre Deuteronomy* 313, commenting on Deut 32:10 as it relates to the revelation at Sinai, the following being the second of four sets of interpretations of that verse:

["יסובנהו"] ["ייבונהו"] בעשר דברות. מלמד שהיה הדיבר יוצא מפי הקודש [ו]היו ישראל מסתכלין בו ויודעין כמה מדרש יש בו וכמה הלכות יש בו וכמה קלין וחמורין יש בו וכמה גזירות שוות יש בו.<sup>37</sup>

"He cared for (= instructed) him": With the Decalogue. This teaches that (when each) Divine Word went forth from the mouth of the Holy One, Israel would observe<sup>38</sup> it and would know how much *midrash* could be derived from it,<sup>39</sup> how many laws (*halakhot*) could be derived from it, how many *a fortiori* arguments could be derived from it, how many arguments by verbal analogy could be derived from it.

<sup>35</sup> Although Exod 20:15 (18) ("All the people saw. . .") says much the same thing, as midrashically understood, it does not place the same emphasis on "you" in an exclusive sense.

<sup>36</sup> Other rabbinic texts stress either that the nations were offered the Torah before it was revealed to Israel, or that they overheard its revelation to Israel, or that the Torah is available to them. See Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 32–49; Marc Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999) (Hebrew).

<sup>37</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy* 313 (ed. Finkelstein, 355), corrected according to MS London (MS Vatican not being extant here). For fuller discussion, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 60–62; idem, "Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization," *AJSR* 31 (2007): 26–28.

<sup>38</sup> For the superiority and significance of this reading, **מסתכלין בו**, rather than Finkelstein's **משכילים בו**, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 222–23 n. 187. The expression **מסתכלין בו** conveys the sense both of "observing" and of "gaining understanding."

<sup>39</sup> Literally, "how much midrash is in it," and similarly for what follows.

As elsewhere in tannaitic midrash,<sup>40</sup> Deut 32:10 is interpreted to indicate that Israel's own interpretive engagement with divinely uttered commands originates with Sinaitic revelation itself. The verb *יְבוֹנְנֶהוּ* of the lemma is generally understood by biblical scholars as a *poel* form of the root *בִּן*, the only occurrence of this form of the verb in the Hebrew Bible. As such, it is thought to mean here to "bestow (mental) attention on" or to "consider (kindly)," but that understanding is derived largely from the sense of the scriptural context.<sup>41</sup> Our commentary similarly construes the word in relation to its scriptural context, that context now being taken to refer to God's revelation of the Torah to Israel at Sinai, but understanding the verb in terms of its root meaning to split or discern.<sup>42</sup> But even so, the verb is read doubly, first as God's instruction of Israel with the Ten Commandments (with God as the verb's subject and Israel as its object), and second as Israel's discerning of the multiple possibilities of interpretation of each commandment (with Israel as the verb's subject and each divine commandment as its object).<sup>43</sup> Thus, already at the very moment of revelation, the Israelites were not simply passive *receivers* of the divine word, but empowered by God as its active *perceivers*. Israel's polymorphic *vision* at Sinai, according to this formulation, was not so much of God as of his words.<sup>44</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> *Mek. of R. Ishmael Bahodesh* 9 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 235; ed. Lauterbach, 2:267), attributed to R. Judah the Patriarch.

<sup>41</sup> See S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (ICC 5; 3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 357; BDB, col. 107.

<sup>42</sup> In the other three sets of interpretations of this verse different contexts are suggested and, hence, different understandings of the word *יְבוֹנְנֶהוּ* are suggested, including both the sense of instruction and the sense of God's attending to Israel's needs. Note that the understanding of *יְבוֹנְנֶהוּ* as "he instructed him" is already found in the Septuagint (*ἐπαίδευσεν αὐτόν*), which does not otherwise construe the verse as referring to the revelation at Sinai. The *targumim* all understand the verb in terms of teaching, using forms of the verbal stem *אלף*. In the present interpretation, the *Sifre's* commentary emphasizes the sense of *בִּינָה* ("discernment"), rabbinically understood as the ability to penetrate below the surface meanings of a text and learn its extended meanings. For this understanding, see the commentaries of David Pardo and *Zera' Abraham* to the *Sifre*, as well as *Midr. Leqah Tob* to our verse.

<sup>43</sup> Similar elasticity can be seen in the preceding set of interpretations of this verse. There the verse is taken to refer to Abraham, that is, to God's accompanying of Abraham in his move from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan, even as the word *יְבוֹנְנֶהוּ* is understood to signify Abraham's having made God known to others as the God of heaven and earth.

<sup>44</sup> Compare with *y. Pe'ah* 2:4 (17a); *Lev. Rab.* 22:1 (ed. Margoliot, 3:496–97; with other parallels listed in notes there), in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi (ca. 235 c.e.): "Even that which an experienced student will someday teach before his teacher was already said to Moses at Sinai." Our tannaitic text, though earlier, in a sense goes

emphasis here is on Israel's *visual*, possibly even mystical,<sup>45</sup> penetration of the interpretive potentiality of each divine utterance to yield (or contain) multiple interpretations by means of a variety of rabbinic hermeneutical rules. Thus, it is asserted that the rabbinic hermeneutical rules themselves were revealed within revelation to the Israelites at Sinai by the power of their visual contemplation of each divine utterance so as to uncover its multiple significations.

A similar idea is expressed by the following, later midrash to the decalogue, from the *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*,<sup>46</sup> but with even more striking visual images:

ד"א "אנכי י"י אלהיך". א"ר הננא בר פפא נראה להם הקב"ה פנים זעופות, פנים בינוניות, פנים מסבירות, פנים שוחקות. פנים זועמות למקרא, כשאדם מלמד את בנו תורה צריך ללמדו באימה. פנים בינונית למשנה. פנים מסבירות לתלמוד. פנים שוחקות לאגדה. אמ' להם הקב"ה אע"פ שאתם רואים כל הדמויות הללו, אלא "אנכי י"י אלהיך".  
א"ר לוי נראה להם הקב"ה כאיקונין הזו שיש לה פנים מכל מקום, אלף בני אדם מביטין בה והיא מבטת בכלום. כך הקב"ה כשהיה מדבר כל אחד ואחד משראל היה אמ' עמי הדבר מדבר, "אנכי י"י אלהיכם אין כת' כאן, אלא "אנכי י"י אלהיך".

Another interpretation of "I am the Lord thy God" (Exod 20:2): R. Hanina bar Pappa (ca. 300) said: The Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to [= was seen by] them [Israel] with a stern face, with an equanimous face, with a friendly face, with joyous face: with a severe face for [the teaching of]<sup>47</sup> Scripture—when a man teaches Torah to his son, he must do so

further: *all of Israel* already recognized the multiple interpretive potentialities of each divine utterance at Sinai. Similarly, note *Sifra Behuqqotay parashah* 2:12 (ed. Weiss, 112c): "On Mt. Sinai through Moses': This teaches that the Torah was given with its laws (*halakhot*), and its specifications, and its explications by Moses from (at) Sinai." Compare as well *Song Rab.* 1:2 (1:12) (ed. Dunsky, 13), in the name of R. Yohanan (ca. 250 c.e.), where an angel reveals to ("tells") each Israelite at Sinai the multiple contents of each divine utterance/commandment, whereas the other rabbis say that each commandment itself informed the Israelites of its multiple contents, whereupon the Israelite would accept it.

<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere the verb *הסתכל* is used with respect to mystical visions, where it similarly denotes seeing and knowing. See, for example, *m. Hag.* 2:1, where the verb is used in a mystical context, but in juxtaposition with the verb *דרש*. Here the verb is employed as a paraphrase of *יְבוֹנְנֶהוּ*, since the root *בִּין* can convey in biblical wisdom literature both the sense of understanding and of perception with the eyes. For the latter, see Prov 7:7; Job 9:11; 23:8.

<sup>46</sup> The collection is conventionally and roughly dated to fifth-century Palestine.

<sup>47</sup> The sense could be that these are the faces with which God appeared as he revealed each of the following, but the reference to the father teaching his son Torah

in awe; with an equanimous face for [the teaching of] Mishnah; with a friendly face for [the teaching of] Talmud; with a joyous face for [the teaching of] 'Aggadah. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Though you see Me in all these guises, [I am still One]—"I am the Lord thy God."

R. Levi (ca. 300) said: The Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to them as a statue with faces on every side, so that though a thousand men might be looking at the statue, [it would seem as though] it was looking at them all. So too when the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke, each and every person in Israel would say, "The Divine Word is addressing me." Note that Scripture does not say, "I am the Lord *your* (plural) God," but "I am the Lord *thy* (singular) God."<sup>48</sup>

The combined exegesis of Exod 20:2 in these two comments is that a singular God (despite his many appearances) addressed each and every Israelite singly (despite being assembled en masse). Assuming, as both comments do, that the substance of revelation is speech, the images employed are strikingly visual.

In the first interpretation, attributed to R. Hanina bar Pappa, there is a subtle slippage between the faces of God revealed to Israel at Sinai, and the pedagogic countenances of the teacher (first, the father for Torah, and then, presumably, rabbinic teachers for the specifically rabbinic modes of Torah discourse). The idea that God appeared to the Israelites in different human appearances (and costumes), is already expressed in earlier tannaitic midrashic sources.<sup>49</sup> However, here the emphasis is on the different *facial* expressions with which God was revealed to Israel, as if to contradict the biblical statement that only Moses encountered God "face to face."<sup>50</sup> Given the subtle shift from revelation to rabbinic pedagogy, we might say that what the people saw at the moment of revelation (of the decalogue, no less), were the discursive faces of rabbinic instruction (Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah). This multiplicity of discursive faces, as seen by Israel at Sinai, is unified in their single divine locus: אֱלֹהֵיךָ ה' אֲנֹכִי ה'.<sup>51</sup> Another, earlier

leads me to think that the reference is to the faces appropriate to teaching, and not just the one-time revelation. However, even if the reference is to the revelation of each of the following types of teaching, my argument would remain unaffected.

<sup>48</sup> Translation is adapted from that of William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festival Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 249.

<sup>49</sup> See *Mek. of R. Ishmael Shirta* 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 129–30; ed. Lauterbach, 2:30–32); *Mek. of R. Shim'on bar Yohai* Exod 15:2 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 80–81).

<sup>50</sup> See above, n. 4. Note that the parallel in *Pesiq. Rab.* 21 (ed. Buber, 100a–102a) attaches these interpretations to both Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:4 ("Face to face the Lord spoke to you," פְּנִים בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם).

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, elsewhere the ideal of the single sage who masters all forms of rabbinic

midrashic collection makes much the same point, with regard to Moses's final words, but employing the sense of taste to denote their discursive multiplicity, rather than sight: "The words of Torah are all one, but they comprise Scripture and Mishnah: Midrash, Halakhot, and Aggadot," דַּבְּרֵי תוֹרָה כּוֹלֵן אַחַת וְיֵשׁ בָּהּ מִקְרָא וּמִשְׁנָה וּמִדְרָשׁ וְהַלְכוֹת וְהַגְדוֹת.<sup>52</sup>

Rabbi Levi's interpretation is even more daring in its implications. Here the "seeing" is directly *reciprocal*: God appears to (נִרְאָה = is seen by) the Israelites as an "icon," אִיקוֹנִין (Greek: εἰκόνα), at whose faces they stare (מְבִיטִין), as the icon stares (מִבְּטֵת) back at them. I imagine this אִיקוֹנִין to be a statue, rather than a flat image, since it is said to have faces (פְּנִים) facing in every direction (מִכָּל מְקוֹם), perhaps being a column or an obelisk. How far we have come from Deut 4:12, וְתִמְנֶנָּה אֵינֶכֶם רְאִים (and Philo's interpretation thereof)! Once again we find the mixing of hearing and seeing modes of perception, for this iconic imagery is by way of explaining how God could *speak* (מְדַבֵּר) to Israel in such a way that each and every one would experience the divine utterance, speaking directly and individually with him/her (as denoted by the singular pronominal suffix of אֱלֹהֵיךָ, "thy God"). However, from the remaining interpretations of Exod 20:2, it becomes clear that each Israelite, individually seen and addressed by God, understands each divine utterance according to his/her capacity (כַּח), thereby providing scriptural support and a Sinaitic origin not just for the multiplicity of rabbinic forms of discourse, but for the multiple interpretations contained therein.<sup>53</sup> These images of a direct and reciprocal visual exchange between God and the Israelites at Sinai (like that of the father teaching his son Torah) lend a feel of both revelatory and pedagogical *intimacy* to an event that is scripturally portrayed, rather, in terms of fear and trembling and a distancing of the revelatory receivers from the visually veiled source of revelatory utterances.<sup>54</sup>

discourse is emphasized. See *Sifre Deuteronomy* 306 (ed. Finkelstein, 339); *Abot R. Nat.* A 8, A 28, B 18 (ed. Schechter, 35–36, 86, 39).

<sup>52</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy* 306 (ed. Finkelstein, 339), according to the better reading of MSS London and Oxford, the first printing, and *Yal. Shim'oni*, as adopted by the Academy of the Hebrew Language data base.

<sup>53</sup> See Fraade, "Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited," 25–26.

<sup>54</sup> For the inner-scriptural tension between intimacy and alienation at Sinai, see Nanette Stahl, *Law and Liminality in the Bible* (JSOTSup 202; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 51–73 ("Sinai: Law and Landscape"). See also Fraade, "Moses and the Commandments," 399–422; idem, "The Kisses of His Mouth": Intimacy and Intermediacy as Performative Aspects of a Midrash Commentary," *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (ed. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene; London: SCM, 2002; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 52–56. For a similar emphasis on the rhetorical significance of rabbinic reworked revelation

4. *Conclusions*

In surveying some biblical and post-biblical sources dealing with the uneasy mixture of hearing and seeing at Sinai, we have barely scratched the surface. Even so, it would be difficult to reduce this variety of interpretations to a simple exegetical paradigm or set of paradigms, whether as to substance, form, or meaning. Certainly, most of the interpretations that we have examined are responding, often quite ingeniously, to inner-biblical tensions, even contradictions, whether intertextually across Scripture or intra-textually within single verses. However, to view these interpretations as being solely scripturally motivated or attendant would be to deny them their historical localization. Thus, to take the most obvious set of interpretations that we have compared, Philo and early midrash, both respond to the same scriptural barbs (especially in Exod 20:15 [18] and 20:19 [22]), and both emphasize the visual aspects of the Sinaitic revelation as, what is rabbinically termed *מראה דיבור*, the visual rather than auditory apprehension of divine speech. However, there are also striking differences between them, such as Philo's repeated deprecating of the sense of hearing, which I have argued must be understood within the broader cultural context of Platonic philosophy.

On the rabbinic side, the midrashic emphasis on the divine voice (*קול*) and utterance (*דיבור/דבר*) assuming physical form or appearance in the eyes of the Israelites at Sinai goes well beyond anything found in pre-rabbinic antecedents. In some such texts what is seen at Sinai are the very faces of rabbinic pedagogical discourse, which might lead us to posit an inner-rabbinic message and motivation of self-authorization. However, such expressions might also be understood in relation to the increasing emphasis on the *viewing* of icons in contemporary Christian and pagan late-antique societies, and in particular to the experience of *intimacy* between worshiper and worshiped that these afforded. Likewise, these expressions might be understood in relation to the dramatic increase in synagogue iconography, both scriptural and temple-related, beginning in the mid-third century and accelerating for the next few centuries.<sup>55</sup> The limits of space permit me only to raise these consid-

for inner-rabbinic pedagogical practice, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi's contribution to this volume.

<sup>55</sup> See my forthcoming article, "The Temple as a Jewish Identity Marker Pre- and Post-70 C.E.: with Particular Attention to the Holy Vessels in Memory and Imagination,"

erations for future exploration. However, to suggest the fruitfulness of this line of inquiry, that is, of relating the rabbinic emphasis on seeing the revelatory divine voice and word to, on the one hand, rabbinic ritualized practice of Torah study, and, on the other, to the historical imaging/imagining of the destroyed temple, I shall conclude with one final midrashic text, from the *Sifre's* comment on Deut 32:26, a remarkable text that has not received its own due attention:

“ויאמר אליהם שימו לבבכם לכל הדברים [אשר אנכי מעיד בכם היום] צריך אדם שיהו עיניו ולבו ואוזניו מכוונים לדברי תורה. וכן הוא אומר “בן אדם שיש לבך וראה בעיניך ובאזניך שמע את כל אשר אני מדבר אתך [לכל-חקות ביתה' ולכל-תורתו] ושמת לבך למבוא הבית. והרי דברים קל וחומר. ומה בית המקדש שנראה בעיני(ה)ם ונמדד ביד צריך אדם שיהו עיניו ולבו ואוזניו מכוונים. דברי תורה שהן כהררין התלוין בסערה על אחת כמה וכמה.”<sup>56</sup>

“He [Moses] said to them [Israel]: Take to heart [lit.: set your heart toward] all the words [with which I have warned you this day]” (Deut 32:46a): A person needs to direct his eyes and his heart and his ears toward the words of Torah, and so it says, “O mortal, mark well [lit.: set your heart], look with your eyes and listen with your ears to what I tell you [regarding all the laws of the Temple of the Lord and all the instructions concerning it.] Note well [lit.: set your heart toward] the entering into the Temple” (Ezek 44:5). We may argue *a fortiori*: If in the case of the Temple, which could be seen with the eyes and measured with the hand, a person needed to direct his eyes and his heart and his ears [toward it], then how much more should this be with words of Torah, which are like mountains suspended by a hair.

The fragile nature of Torah teaching—written and oral and their interdependence—requires the full sensory attention of its receivers, especially ocular and auditory, no less (in fact, more) than did participation in Temple worship, now lost except to the imagination, whether via textual or figurative visualization. The rabbinic grappling with the balance of sight to sound at Sinai, while profoundly

in *Jewish Identities in Antiquity: Permutations and Transformations* (ed. Lee I. Levine; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). See also Rachel Neis, “Vision and Visuality in Late Antique Rabbinic Culture” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2007); idem, “Embracing Icons: The Face of Jacob on the “Throne of God,” *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* 1 (2007): 36–54.

<sup>56</sup> Text is according to *Sifre Deuteronomy* 335 (ed. Finkelstein, 384–85), according to MS London, according to the data base of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. I have corrected the biblical citation to agree with the Masoretic Text. For fuller treatment of the larger textual unit in the *Sifre*, see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 119–20.

responsive to the conflicting cues of the biblical text, was no less responsive to the need for *study* of that text to be sensorially stimulating to the eyes and ears and heart in the ritual performance of תלמוד תורה—the dialogical study of written and oral Torah—as an act of community-forming and identity-affirming worship.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> This essay benefited from a prior presentation at “The Eleventh International Orion Symposium, Marking the 60th Anniversary of the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls: New Approaches to the Study of Biblical Interpretation in Judaism of the Second Temple Period and in Early Christianity,” Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, and the Center for the Study of Christianity, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 19, 2007; from the comments of graduate students in the program in Studies in Hebrew Culture at Tel-Aviv University, June 4, 2008; and from discussions with Hindy Najman, Vered Noam, and Margaret Olin.

## CONTENTS

Editorial Statement .....	vii
Introduction .....	ix
Some Unanticipated Consequences of the Sinai Revelation: A Religion of Laws .....	1
James L. Kugel	
“Fire, Cloud, and Deep Darkness” (Deuteronomy 5:22): Deuteronomy’s Recasting of Revelation .....	15
Marc Zvi Brettler	
Priestly Prophets at Qumran: Summoning Sinai through the <i>Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice</i> .....	29
Judith H. Newman	
Moving Mountains: From Sinai to Jerusalem .....	73
George J. Brooke	
Moses, David and Scribal Revelation: Preservation and Renewal in Second Temple Jewish Textual Traditions .....	91
Eva Mroczek	
The Giving of the Torah at Sinai and the Ethics of the Qumran Community .....	117
Marcus Tso	
Josephus’ “ <i>Theokratia</i> ” and Mosaic Discourse: The Actualization of the Revelation at Sinai .....	129
Zuleika Rodgers	
Why did Paul include an Exegesis of Moses’ Shining Face (Exod 34) in 2 Cor 3? .....	149
Moses’ Strength, Well-being and (Transitory) Glory, according to Philo, Josephus, Paul, and the Corinthian Sophists George H. van Kooten	

In the Mirror of the Divine Face: The Enochic Features of the <i>Exagoge</i> of Ezekiel the Tragedian .....	183
Andrei Orlov	
Torah and Eschatology in the <i>Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch</i> .....	201
Matthias Henze	
Can the Homilists Cross the Sea Again? Revelation in <i>Mekilta Shirata</i> .....	217
Ishay Rosen-Zvi	
Hearing and Seeing at Sinai: Interpretive Trajectories .....	247
Steven D. Fraade	
The Giving of the Torah: Targumic Perspectives .....	269
Charles Thomas Robert Hayward	
God’s Back! What did Moses see on Sinai? .....	287
Diana Lipton	
Sinai in Art and Architecture .....	313
David Brown	
Sinai since Spinoza: Reflections on Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought .....	333
Paul Franks	
Index of Modern Authors .....	355
Subject Index .....	363
Index of Primary Texts .....	368