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HEARING AND SEEING AT SINAI: INTERPRETIVE TRAJECTORIES

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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 -phan (φῶνα), 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 Sinaïte 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 mediated, 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 הרה מנה (the “giving of Torah”). As some of our earliest rabbinic midrashim awkwardly express this idea, כֶּסֶנֶּלֶת הָעֵשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְחָמָה... translated literally, “When the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to give Torah to Israel...”

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


3 While modern critical Bible scholars might attribute these differences to distinct authorial or editorial literary strands, canonical interpreters would seek either to
all of the emphasis on hearing the words of an incorporeal God, and with the anxious recognition that visual manifestations of God could easily lead to idolatry (Deut 4:15–19), “seeing is believing.” While, on the one hand, “Man may not see me and live,” (Exod 33:20; cf. Gen 32:31), on the other, God instructs Moses to prepare the people, “for on the third day the Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai.” (Exod 19:11).

Moses is authorized as supreme prophet by the fact that to him alone God speaks “face to face, as one man speaks to another” (Exod 33:11). After the golden calf incident, Moses, needing a booster shot of prophetic self-confidence, desires, on the one hand, for God to reveal to him his “ways,” so that he may know him, “and that he may show me his glory” (Exod 33:13), while, on the other, for God to reveal to him his “glory,” (Num 12:8), that is, God’s physical self-manifestation, with, here as elsewhere, God’s glory being the object of sight, even if it blocks seeing God himself. God grants the former (Exod 34:6–7), while only partly granting the latter: “You will see My back; but My face must not be seen.” (33:23). Even so, Moses has come a long way since, in God’s first self-disclosure to him at the burning bush, when “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Exod 3:6).

Just as the people had previously basked in the sight of God’s glory at Mt. Sinai (“Now the Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain,” Num 11:1, while) in their affections toward him, he is only too happy for the resumption of God’s physical manifestation in their sight after the Golden Calf incident (which, after all, was the consequence of their desire for a visual representation of God in Moses’s absence [Exod 32:1]). Less dramatically, but more sustainedly, God’s glory is now visually present to them as the pillar of cloud at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting: “When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent.” (Exod 40:34). The biblical scene that most challenges the Torah’s own strictures against seeing God follows the ratification of the covenant at Sinai, in which Moses reads the book of the covenant (the book of the covenant) in the ears of the people, to which they acclaim, “All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do!” (Exod 24:7). However, hearing was insufficient, at least for Israel’s leaders, for immediately thereafter we are told that “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel…” Yet He [God] did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, harmonize them or to apprehend their intra-textual interplay. In what follows, I attend to the relation between hearing and seeing as modes of revelatory reception only with respect to Sinai, and not within the Hebrew Bible and among its ancient interpreters more broadly.

For Moses’s exceptional prophetic status in this regard, see Deut 34:7 (“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord spoke face to face,” Num 12:6–8: “…Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household, with him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord.”), and compare Num 12:14; Deut 5:29; Ps 105:21, the latter, with Deut 5:4, where Moses addresses the people, “Face to face with the Lord spoke Moses, and all the people saw God’s face, which is generally understood here to be figurative (cf. 5:5), without denoting that Israel as a whole saw God’s face. See Jeffrey Tigay, JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 61. However, a literal understanding remains an interpretive possibility. Note how a bara’et haqeyl in the Babylonian Talmud (Kebur 49b) modifies the contrast between Moses’s direct seeing of God and that of the other prophets in Num 12:6–8: Moses saw God through a clear spectum (קצף,path, “spectrum”), while the other prophets saw him through an unclear spectum (קצף, “spectrum”). Compare Lev. 26:14 (ed. Margules, 1:31), as well as 1 Cor 13:12. For the continuing development of this dialectical motif, see Elliot R. Wolfson, Through a Spectum That Shines: Concepts of Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).


4 Here, as elsewhere as we shall see, there may be a play on the two verbs את and את (to fear) and את (to see), which in some forms are morphologically identical. See below, n. 14. The burning bush pericope (Exod 3:1–4:17), like that of the revelation at Mt. Sinai, appears ambivalent as to the relation between ocular and auditory means of God’s self-disclosure and communication with Moses (3:2–5), of God’s perception of Israel’s suffering (5:7, 9), and of God’s charge to Moses to communicate with Pharaoh and the Israelites (3:10–4:17). For the variety of interpretations of Moses’s viewing of God’s “back,” see Diana Lipton’s essay in this volume.

5 Cf. J. En. 89:30: “And after that, I saw the Lord of the sheep who stood before him, and his appearance was majestic and fearfull and mighty, and all those sheep saw him and were afraid before him.” George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, J Enoch: A New Translation Based on the Hexapla Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 126. For the connection between seeing and fear, see above, n. 6, and below, n. 14.
and they ate and drank”. 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,” and Rashi, that is, they did not actually see God with their eyes, but only received a prophetic vision, as did the later prophets. Similarly, Maimonides avers that whatever they “saw” was not with the physical sense of sight, but with the intellect.
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.

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 Exodus 20:15 (18), which verse may first be cited in its entirety: רַעָלָה אִם יִאֶתְרוֹנֵת יְשֵׁכֵנוּ, אִם יִאֶתְרוֹנֵת יְשֵׁכֵנוּ שִׁלְחֶנְנוּ יִלְּךָ. This verse 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 (יָרָא), 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:

ולֹא חָפַת הַשָּׁמְשִׁים אֶתְּהָא מֹשֶׁה מֵעָבָדָן, רָאָא מֵעָבָדָן מֵעָבָדָן בָּנוֹתָן, בָּנֹתָן וְלָמָּה הָבִים לֹא חָפַת הַשָּׁמְשִׁים אֶתְּהָא מֹשֶׁה מֵעָבָדָן. רָאָא מֵעָבָדָן מֵעָבָדָן בָּנוֹתָן, בָּנֹתָן וְלָמָּה הָבִים לֹא חָפַת הַשָּׁמְשִׁים אֶתְּהָא מֹשֶׁה מֵעָבָדָן. רָאָא מֵעָבָדָן מֵעָבָדָן בָּנוֹתָן, בָּנֹתָן וְלָמָּה הָבִים לֹא חָפַת הַשָּׁמְשִׁים אֶתְּהָא מֹשֶׁה מֵעָבָדָן. רָאָא מֵעָבָדָן מֵעָבָדָן בָּנוֹתָן, בָּנֹתָן וְלָמָּה הָבִים לֹא חָפַת הַשָּׁמְשִׁים אֶתְּהָא מֹשֶׁה מֵעָבָדָן.

“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 הָעַר, to see, for that which is audible: thunder. In the present biblical context the word for thunder (טָהוֹן), is also that for “voice,” in particular, the voice of God (as well as for the blare of the horn).
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 הָעַר 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).

Thus, we may compare, as do ancient exegetes, this use of the verb הָעַר with another proposition. It is a common rabbinic motif to speak of the people “saw the fear.” See especially Kalman E. Bland, The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the VIinal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
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By contrast, Rabbi Akiba’s interpretation 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 location 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. 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 Exodus 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 כ applauds 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


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

For a fuller version of this tradition, in which each word הָרַע/וֹדְרֵי, upon issuing from God’s mouth, would encircle the whole camp of the Israelites, see *Sifre Deut 34* (ed. Finkelstein, 1999), commenting on Deut 38:2, בְּנֶבֶשׁ, “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 hypostatization 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 Schrifttext,” *ANRW* Part 2, *Pentateuch 19.2* (1979): 580–618.
Once again, consistent with the view of R. Akiba in the Mekila 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). 25

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.). 26 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 cross our minds, for God is not as a man needing mouth and tongue and windpipe. [33] I should suppose that God wrought upon 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 so 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 יתננהל נֶתֶנַו, see above, n. 14. 18 See previous note and above, n. 3.


21 See Sifre Numbers 103 (ed. Horovitz, 101), interpreting Num 12:8 (on God’s having communicated with Moses [visually]), instead of MT וַתֶּלֶבֶּל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוּ הָאָדָם) [plainly], the former also being evidenced in the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Peshitta, and the targumim in light of Exod 33:20: 19, 20 (the latter): 22, 23 (the former). - The phrase לֹא קִנֵּה יְהוָה אֶל מִלְחָמוֹת וּלְאוֹת אֶל הֶבַל אֱלֹהָיו אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ אֱלֹהִים מְנַלָּה הָאָדָם (which Moses brings to the Lord, and the Lord spoke to the people (which God spoke to the people), is the phrase most likely used here.

22 In appearance: This is the appearance of the divine utterance. But perhaps it is not 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). 23 This is the text chosen by the Academy of the Hebrew Language for its data base, mainly following MS Vatican. However, the latter is also followed here follows MS Oxford and Ed. Shmuel, while Horovitz and other printed editions (beginning with that of Venice, 1526) have rendered the phrase, “the appearance of the divine indwelling,” as does MS London. MS Vatican has added לֹא הָעַיָּן מְלֹא מִלְחָמוֹת מְלֹא מִלְחָמוֹת, “the appearance of God.” R. Hillel ad loc. explains: “The appearance of God,” 24 פֹּלַקְשׁ וַתִּמָּקֵד, פָּרָתָּה אִשָּׁה מְלֹא מִלְחָמוֹת, “blessed be He, meaning, not in the manner of a parable and riddle.” Note also the command of Lev. 23:9 (and Num. 15:39) on the use of Nikhel: בְּרֵשֵׁית אוֹת הֲלֹא הָעַיָּן מְלֹא מִלְחָמוֹת, that is, just the seeing the voice. 25 Mek. of R. Shimon bar Yochai Exod 20:15 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 154-55). For text and translation, see also Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai (ed. and trans. W. David Nelson; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 235. While continually consulting Nelson’s, it is my own. 26 A similar statement is made, also in the name of R. Elezer, with regard to the Israelites’ visionary experience at the Reed Sea: Mek. of R. Shimon bar Yochai Exod 15:2 (ed. Epstein-Melamed, 78). 27 In the Hebrew of Exod 20:15 (18), there is not direct object to the phrase אֲשֶׁר אָמְרָה מִלְחָמוֹת, “and the people saw,” allowing for the present question and the possibility.
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. [46] 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. 27

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
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 shows 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. 28

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 lacomic 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 τὸ παρέσκευμα for “thunder” with τῷ παρέσκευμα,
the same Greek word used for the הַקּוֹדֶשׁ (blare) of the horn and the
הַקּוֹדֶשׁ (voice) of God is critical to Philo’s interpretation, as is the use
of τὸ παρέσκευμα for thunder to R. Akiba’s interpretation. However, it should be
emphasized that R. Akiba’s interpretation in the Mezila 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 sup-
port of his argument. Of course, that tells us nothing of how each of
these interpretations first arose (that is, whether or not from exegetical
interpretation of the verse in its scriptural context), but it does tell us

27 For text and translation (by F. H. Colson), see the LCL 7:20–31. For fire, repre-
senting Torah, having the ability both to give light and heat as well as (especially its esoter-
ical teachings) to burn, see Mek. of R. Ishmael Babylonish 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 215;
ed. Lauterbach 2:20–21); Mek. of R. Shimon bar Yochai Exod 19:8 (ed. Epstein-Melamed,
143–44); Sifte Deutonomy 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 399–400); m. Abot 2:10; t. Hag. 25 (ed.
Lieberman, 381); y. Hag. 2:1 (77a) (ed. Sussmann, col. 782); b. Hag. 13a–b; t. Abot R.
Nah. 29 (ed. Schneirer, 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 Babylonish 3, 4 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 214, 216; ed. Lauterbach,
2:218, 223).

28 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, “The Torah speaks in human language”). 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. 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. Finally, it should be stressed that Philo uniquely understands Deut 4:12, which is never rabbinically adduced in this connection, to denote the types of voices/speech: the human/grammatica, which is (merely) heard, and the divine, which is “seen by the eye of the soul.”

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 Phionic 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 Bahdesh 9, comments:

אֲשֶׁר אֲרֵא הָאָדָם, הָפֹרָה בִּין שָׂכַרְנָה וְרָמָה בִּין נוֹרָה, הֶזֶּה בְּרֵי אֶדְמוֹנָה גַּנֶּה, וְDoctors [S. Vermes, J. Pope, R. Brown...[וְדִּידְוִי מִלֶּלֶל גַּלְּפָּר, וְלֵךְ שְׁמַע שָׁמֵאָה כְּרַא מַּלֶּלֶל, וּלְמַכָּבָּה, אל אִשָּׁמָא אֲשֶׁר אֲרֵא הָאָדָם]

“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.) say: “You yourselves have seen”: Why is it said? Since it says, “All the king 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 the saw. Therefore, Scripture says, “You yourselves have seen”: The nation of the world have not seen

30 See also Philo, Sacrifices 78 (LCL 2:153): “But when, unforeseen and unhoped 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 hunters of knowledge, and substituted in our minds sight, the sweetest 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 5:772–73); The representation of God, however, 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).

31 Compare above, n.29.

32 The closest is the early medieval Midrash Tan Ha 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 predel the seeing of God (or his voice), which is how the verse is usually understood: Pirqe Ra Sh., supplement 7 (ed. Mandelbaum, 171). Tanh. Halakot 4, Itz Elaz ad loc. See above, n.18.

33 This text is important to Daniel Boyarin (Border Lines: The Purification of Judaism/Christianity [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], 114) in arguing for a Jewish “logos theology” that is both “pre- and pararrabbinic.” However, Boyarin fails to indicate its comparative and constructive interactions with early rabbinic midrash.

34 The text as I have presented it follows mainly MS Oxford, according to the database 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 homoioteleuton. 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 *Meqilla* 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 *Meqilla*’s interpretive argument is two-fold, with both parts of the argument being grounded in the word **םיה** (“you”), which word is not strictly required by Hebrew syntax, and therefore must bear particular meaning. The opening anonymous interpretation stresses the superiority of first-hand seeing (**סימיא** **םיה**), to second-hand hearing (**סוֹרֵד** **םיה**), 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 **םיה** as being non-superficial: “You yourselves (and no others) have seen…” This becomes manifest through the citation of the intertext from Psalms, which might be understood (we are 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.”

Hearing 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 *Meqilla* 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 *Sifra Deuteronomy* 315, 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:

*משלחך* **סימיא** [ברננה] ** الديمقراط** מבאר המקודה **שהיה** [הלさら] **פורטיק** ברי די** מדה** ** theano** [בכף הלכלוך teil ש** רב**]

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 it and would know how much midrash could be derived from it; 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.

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35 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.

36 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).


38 For the superiority and significance of this reading, *משלחך* ברי די** מדה** מ** תירוק** see Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 222–23 n. 157. The expression ברי די** מדה** ** תירוק** conveys the sense both of “observing” and of “gaining understanding.”

39 Literally, “how much midrash is in it,” and similarly for what follows.
As elsewhere in tannaitic midrash, Deut 32:10 is interpreted to indicate that Israel's own interpretive engagement with divinely uttered commands originates with Sinitic revelation itself. The verb הַזָּכַרְת, 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. 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. 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 command as its object). Thus, already at the very moment of revelation, the Israelites were not simply passive receivers of the divine word, but empowered by God as active perceivers. Israel’s polymorphic vision at Sinai, according to this formulation, was not so much of God as of his words. The emphasis here is on Israel’s visual, possibly even mystical, penetration of the interpretative 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 Pesiga de Rab Kahana, but with even more striking visual images:

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] 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 Behagqay parashah 2:12 (ed. Weis, 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 Sanh Rab. 1:2 (1:12) (ed. Dusky, 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.

Elsewhere the verb נַצְרָה is used with respect to mystical visions, where it similarly denotes seeing and knowing. See, for example, m. Yeb 2:1, where the verb is used in a mystical context, but in juxtaposition with the verb רָאָה. Here the verb is employed as a paraphrase of נָצַרать, since the rootาน 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.

The collection is conventionally and roughly dated to fifth-century Palestine.
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." Ṣ.  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.""⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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: סלע הנבואה.⁴⁹ 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.

Translation is adapted from that of William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: R. Kahana’s Compilation of Discourses for Sabbath and Festal Days (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 249.

⁴⁷ See above, n. 4. Note that the parallel in Pang. 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.") עניב תם Greenville 만 פיקנס בירה ידה ידוקו בדוקו.
⁴⁹ Sifre Deut 306 (ed. Finkelstein, 339), according to the better reading of MSS London and Oxford, the first printing, and Td. Shi’moni, as adopted by the Academy of the Hebrew Language data base.
⁵¹ 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 Reasons: 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, 2008), 35–56. 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 bars (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 מראות דבר, 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 (ל✪כ) and utterance (דובוע/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 rabbinc 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 inconography, both scriptural and temple-related, beginning in the mid-third century and accelerating for the next few centuries. The limits of space permit me only to raise these consid-

65 For inner-rabbinic pedagogical practice, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi’s contribution to this volume.


67 Text is according to Sifre Deutonomy 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 הַלְּמֻדָּה הָרֹתָה—the dialogical study of written and oral Torah—as an act of community-forming and identity-affirming worship.37

37 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.
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