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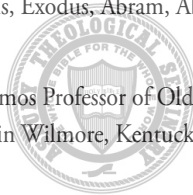
Divine Revelation in the Pentateuch

Abstract:

Studies of divine revelation in the Old Testament rightly focus on Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai recorded in Exodus 19-24 (and interpreted in Deuteronomy 4). But theologians often neglect the earlier expressions of divine self-disclosure, which hold potential to enrich our understanding of this essential Christian doctrine. This paper investigates the ancestral narratives of Genesis (especially Gen 12:7 and 17:1) and the appearance of YHWH to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3-4), in order to gain a more complete perception of divine revelation in the Pentateuch, which then offers contributions to Christian theologizing about the doctrine of revelation generally. This paper was presented to the Asbury ARP Interdisciplinary Colloquium for 2017 in celebration of the decennial of the Amos endowment, marking the beginning of the Asbury PhD (Biblical Studies) program. This paper was presented in memory of Mr. Paul S. Amos and in honor of Mrs. Jean R. Amos.

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Introduction

γνωρίσας ἡμῖν
τὸ μυστήριον
τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ
(Ephesians 1:9)

Christians around the world and through the ages agree on this chief postulate of Christian doctrine, as articulated by Thomas C. Oden: “God has taken initiative to make God’s purpose known, to become self-disclosed, [and] to address humanity through human history. The shorthand term for this primary postulate is *revelation*.”¹ In my own theological tradition, we believe “that the living core of the Christian faith was *revealed in scripture*, illumined in tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”² The concept is assumed in our Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, going back beyond the creed to New Testament times (Rom 1:17-19), which is itself rooted in Israel’s salvation history known in the plagues and exodus event (Exod 1-24). These then are the origins of our doctrine of revelation.

While everyone agrees that God’s revelation is foundational to what we believe as Christians, theologians are not agreed on the form(s) of revelation.³ Contributing to the lack of consensus is the reality that too few handbooks or introductory textbooks provide adequate biblical foundations for the doctrine, and most treatments of Old Testament revelation focus nearly exclusively on the Sinai revelation of Exod 19-24 and Deut 4.⁴ Our understanding of divine self-disclosure, therefore, may be impoverished, or at least, less than thoroughly understood, because we have failed to explore the earliest expressions of this concept in the Bible. And this failure likely reflects a general failure in the pew and the pulpit to grasp the fundamentals of the self-revelation of God in scripture.

This brief study addresses the problem by investigating first, the lexical and literary specifics of divine self-disclosure in the ancestral narratives of Genesis, then the relationship of those appearances to the exodus event, and finally, I will offer a few implications of this approach to our constructions of divine revelation and its significance in Christian theology. This investigation will examine the details of two specific appearances of ὙΗΩΗ to Abraham to discern the nature and consequences of those appearances, in order better to understand their possible connections with the definitive text of divine revelation in the Old Testament, that of the Sinai revelation. This may secondarily offer a contribution to Christian theologizing about divine self-disclosure more generally.

Divine Self-Revealing in the Ancestral Narratives of Genesis

In order adequately to understand the significance of YHWH's appearances in the ancestral narratives (Gen 12-36), it will be necessary to review two preliminary matters before turning to the textual details. The first is the consistent and nearly ubiquitous way in which deities are portrayed in iconographic evidence in the ancient Near East. Temples and cult sites throughout the ancient world, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Anatolian Hittites, exhibited "a remarkable general commonality...regarding conceptions of deity and divine presence."⁵ That remarkable commonality can be summarized as the representation of the gods and goddesses in one of four well-attested forms: anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, mixed, or as inanimate objects.⁶ For our purposes, it is enough to observe at the outset of this investigation that, regardless of our interpretation of the ancient perceptions of these images, it was widely assumed the gods could be represented physically and that the sheer physicality of the deity revealed some specific feature of that deity's powers and persona.

The second preliminary matter is the primal instinct associated with writing in the ancient world, which was a mystical or numinous thing, sometimes even magical. The first written texts were mnemonic tools – means for aiding the memory instead of communicating something entirely new. We have reason to believe that most ancient texts were not written in a way that could be understood except by someone who already knew the text well. The first scripts were extremely complex, and could only be read and written by specialists with a great deal of training. When the alphabet was first invented, it had no way of indicating vowels so that it still did not reflect spoken language closely. Instead, we might think of the written text as a musical score for a musician who knows the piece well. Some musicians can sight-read better than others but most would need to know the music well before "reading" the score.⁷ Even behind the written text, which seemed mysterious and wonderful in its own way, the words themselves were thought to have their own power in the ancient world. The power of the written word seemed enhanced by its inaccessibility. Especially in predominantly oral cultures, spoken words had their own power. The religious practices of polytheism in both Egypt and Mesopotamia routinely assumed the reality of performative magic. Such magic sometimes involved a physical action but usually also included the use of words to be recited. In ancient Israel, the emotional power of the spoken word was quite real. For example, the verbal naming of a child at birth was perceived as revealing profound truth about the newborn child (Genesis 4:1). Similarly, the pronunciation of God's name was not to be taken lightly (Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:17-18). We will have occasion to return to this topic at the conclusion of this paper.

The textual details of YHWH's self-revelation to Israel's ancestors in Gen 12-36 are relatively straightforward. The first appearance of YHWH to Abram is paradigmatic for the others. The great progenitor of ancient Israel has obediently abandoned everything in his life that is a source of comfort and security, launching out to a life of uncertainty, and arriving at a place called Shechem (12:1-6). He comes to the oak of Moreh, not as a settler but as a visitor, to a sacred site, the *māqôm* of Shechem, being most likely a noted cultic site where one could expect to receive divine oracles or revelations ("Moreh" apparently connoting "teacher" or perhaps "diviner"⁸; see also Gen 35:4; Deut 11:30; Josh 24:26; and Judg 9:6,37). In this moment, when Abram was likely seeking confirmation that he had acted wisely in obeying YHWH, the text presents us with the first recorded appearance (12:7).

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר

לְיָרְעֶךָ אֶתְּנֶנְךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

"Then YHWH appeared to Abram, saying,
"To your seed I will give this land."⁹

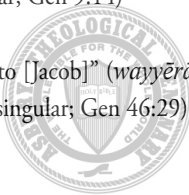
The verb *wayyērāʾ*, "then [YHWH] appeared," is the common root *to see* (*r'h*), here occurring in the causative-reflexive use of the N-stem, with the meaning *become visible* or *appear*. With this nuance, the subject, in this case YHWH, is at the same time object (or recipient) of the action, which here may also denote permission.¹⁰ We might consider a more dynamically equivalent translation, such as "Then YHWH *allowed himself to be seen* by/to Abram." To illustrate the general connotation of N-stem *r'h*, consider these occurrences in non-theophanic contexts in Genesis.

(1) "...and let the dry land *appear*" (*wātērā'eh*; N-stem, jussive, third, fem, singular; Gen 1:9)

(2) "...the mountain tops *appeared*" (*nir'û*; N-stem, perfect, third, common, plural; Gen 8:5)

(3) "...and [when] the rainbow *is seen* in the clouds" (*wānir'ātā*); N-stem, irreal perfect, third, feminine, singular; Gen 9:14)

(4) "[Joseph] *presented himself* to [Jacob]" (*wayyērā*; N-stem, imperfect with *waw* consecutive, third, masculine, singular; Gen 46:29)



In Gen 12:7, the first occurrence of the term in revelatory speech to the ancestors, the substance of the appearance is contained in the words “to your seed I will give this land.” The promises given in 12:2-3 are ambiguous and amorphous until finally given specificity in this utterance. And that is the point of divine revelation in Genesis. When YHWH appeared to Abram, the common verb of visual-sensory perception, to “see,” is used. But what Abram actually *saw* is not the point. Instead we are drawn in this instance immediately to the content of what YHWH said by the exegetical use of the next past narrative of the verse, *wayyō’mer*, “and [YHWH] said”. Although this use of the past narrative could serve a sequential connotation – first YHWH appeared, and then he spoke – the common use of this term, *saying*, to expand or clarify the immediately preceding clause, is more likely here.¹¹ Or, we may think of the sequential and the exegetical as working in tandem; “the major fact or situation is stated first, and then the particulars or details, component or concomitant situations are filled in.”¹² That seems to be the case here; the content of the divine speech is superimposed on the vision of YHWH. By diverting the reader away from the vision of God, actually sidestepping the specifics of the appearance of YHWH itself, the text articulates instead the plans YHWH has for Abram: promises of seed and land, which counter the fear Abram has of knowing that “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (v. 6). This territory, which will in time become known as the “promised land,” is inhabited by others, and Abram can only be aware of his tenuous and uncertain status in their midst. The promises of the divine revelation are his only source of comfort and security.

The second appearance of YHWH to Abram using the verb *wayyērā’* is similar (17:1).

וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בְּרַחֲשָׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשֶׁע שָׁנִים
וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-אֵל שְׂדֵי
וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-אֵל שְׂדֵי

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old,

YHWH appeared to Abram, saying, ‘I am El Shadday’
walk before me and be blameless.”

Here again, that which has “become visible” is suppressed by the narrative that drives immediately to the content of divine speech. Whereas we might ask, What precisely did Abram see, the text is not interested in sensory details.¹³ YHWH causes himself to be seen by Abram, or reveals himself to him, pulling back the curtain of human limitation as it were, allowing himself – even presenting himself – in theophanic certainty. And yet paradoxically, the text shows no interest in what Abram sees. Because of recurrence of the term in this way in the ancestral narratives,

we understand *wayyērā*’ to become a technical term by means of its unfolding repetitions, denoting intentionally the revelatory appearance of YHWH to Israel’s ancestors. But in each case, what the patriarch *sees* is not the issue but rather what he *hears*. This second occurrence, like that of 12:7, uses *wayyōmer*, “and [YHWH] said” to mark the actual beginning of the revelation. This time, Abram hears YHWH identify himself as El Shadday, most likely denoting something like “God of the Wilderness.”¹⁴ Much more could be said about the revelation of this special patriarchal name, El Shadday, but for our purposes it is enough to observe that the revelatory speech moves quickly to the volitional string, “walk before me and be blameless.”¹⁵ Instead of revealing YHWH’s future plan for Abram as at 12:7, this occurrence of divine self-revealing begins by giving insight into the character of YHWH, and moves immediately to YHWH’s expectations for the character of Abram. The blamelessness required here of Abram has both positive and negative aspects, appealing to positive ethical actions and the absence of negative characteristics.¹⁶ And this call for holiness introduces the covenant relationship YHWH is establishing with Abram, henceforth known as Abraham, and exemplifies the character of all Israelites in the future, who name Abraham as the father of their faith.

These first two occurrences of *wayyērā*’ are paradigmatic for the others in the ancestral narratives. It gradually becomes a *terminus technicus* for unique, divine self-revealing in these narratives; an otherwise ordinary word is hereby given extraordinary significance. YHWH is the Israelite God of miraculous plagues, deliverance from slavery, and covenant relationship. In these ancestral narratives, YHWH is also the personal God of Revelation for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This specific form of the term occurs again at Gen 18:1 (Abraham again), 26:2 and 24 (Isaac), and 35:9 (Jacob). In addition to these six occurrences of the past narrative (*wayyērā*’), the N-stem of **r’h* occurs four more times in Genesis in revelatory contexts: Gen 12:7; 22:14; 35:1; 48:3.¹⁷ YHWH *appears* to the ancestors at critical junctures of their individual faith journeys in moments for learning more about YHWH and for making critical, life-altering decisions. The emphasis is never on the physical appearance of that which is seen but on the content of the truth revealed or communicated about God and about the patriarch. In most cases, the “appearance” becomes a verbal communiqué from God instead of a vision of God’s physicality. These communiqués reveal more of the character of God and give direction or comfort to the patriarch. Perhaps, in order to understand why the verb *see* is used at all, we might think in terms of the concept of divine accommodation.¹⁸ In order for any theophany in the Bronze Age to be legitimate, in all probability, a physical appearance would have been expected. The text intends us to imagine that Abram did, in fact, see God in some form or fashion. But the traditions were

developed in a way to minimize that reality as Israelites began to understand the secondary significance of God's physicality.¹⁹ Divine self-revealing to the ancestors is not given in order to satisfy human curiosity about God, but rather to deepen the relationship in a way that inspires the patriarch to press forward in obedience. And this revelation, with its particularizing speech of promises, was enough for Abram. His response? He built an altar and worshipped (12:7b-8).²⁰

The Book of Exodus and the Sinai Appearance of YHWH

The ancestral covenant has rightly been called “the Old Testament of the Old Testament.”²¹ In the canonical flow of things, YHWH's relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob adumbrates and prepares for his relationship with Israel. Abraham's experiences are to mirror theirs; his obedience, sojourns, and his covenant with YHWH find expression in Israel's. Not surprisingly then, this concept of God's self-revelatory communication has profound parallels later when YHWH reveals himself to Moses and the Israelites.

The first occurrence of N-stem **r'h* in Exodus is in the account of the angel of YHWH, who “appeared” (*wayyērā*) to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:2; and cf. 4:1,5). Surely, as one reads from Genesis to Exodus, the use of this technical term for divine self-revealing from the ancestral period is intentional here in Exod 3:2. Indeed, the sheer physicality of the vision and the impossibility of a desert bush burning in such a way without being consumed caught Moses' attention and drew him into dialogue with YHWH (Exod 3:3).²² And like the appearances of YHWH to the ancestors, that which Moses sees is irrelevant to the narrative. The “messenger of YHWH” (*mal'ak YHWH*) is without description despite other appearances in the Hebrew Bible,²³ and the “bush” (*sāneh*) from which YHWH speaks is a nondescript shrub, a noun occurring only six times in the Bible (Exod 3:2 [3x], 3,4; Deut 33:16).²⁴ The presence of the bush, however, is not as representation of YHWH but nothing more than an attention-getter for the wayward Moses. Instead of a description of physical numinous presence, Moses hears a command not to draw closer. Instead, he must remove his sandals, because the “place” (or cult site, *māqôm*, see Gen 12:6; Exod 20:24; Deut 12:2,5) is holy ground. The text assiduously avoids any description of the physicality of YHWH, and refers instead to the messenger's appearance “in a flame of fire from the center of the bush” (v. 2) and a voice “from the midst of the bush” (v. 4), and further to the surroundings; that is, the holy ground around the bush (v. 5). No eye may gaze upon God. The text deflects the question of the physicality of YHWH by directing attention to what is below, around, or above him (cf. Isa 6:2). In this case, as with the appearances to the ancestors of Genesis, the revelation itself is introduced with an exegetical *wayyō'mer*, “and

[YHWH] said,” introducing another predicate nominative for identification: “I am the God of your father” (Exod 3:6). As with the ancestors of old, what Moses *sees* is not the issue, but rather what he *hears*; the revelatory “I am...” proclamation (and, of course, see Exod 3:14).

The book of Exodus has six other occurrences of the verb N-stem **r’h* for unique divine revelation. For example, in a passage deliberately linking the Mosaic revelation together with the earlier ancestral covenant, YHWH declares that he “appeared” (*wā’ērā’*, past narrative, first common singular) to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday but not as YHWH (Exod 6:3). Interestingly in this context, the verb used for self-revelation is the N-stem of **yd’*; that is, “by my name, ‘YHWH’ I did not *make myself known*” (*nôda ‘tî*; N-stem, perfect first common singular), which parallels and contributes meaning to the N-stem of **r’h* under consideration here.²⁵ Beyond these particular lexical specifics, God reveals himself to Israel through pillars of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21-22; Num 9:15-23), theophanies of thunder and lightning and trumpet blast (Exod 19:16), or through divinely approved Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; 1 Sam 23:1-6). We conclude from these references that YHWH is paradoxically a hidden God who reveals himself – a transcendent God of imminence and nearness.²⁶

This survey of the occurrences of N-stem **r’h* in Genesis and Exodus suggests they prepare the reader for the great Sinai revelation (Exod 19-24), which itself does not use this particular articulation of self-revealing. And yet, on the occasion of the burning bush revelation, YHWH assured Moses that Moses would return to Sinai and worship on the mountain with the newly liberated people as a sign that YHWH had guided, delivered, and protected (Exod 3:12). The Sinai revelation is the fulfillment of that promise, and clearly a pinnacle of God’s self-disclosing agenda. In some ways, all that we have surveyed so far – that is, the pattern in which divine appearances are reconfigured by the narrative in order to introduce verbal revelation of God’s will and way – now comes to full expression in the Sinai revelation, even without use of the N-stem **r’h*. We turn now to a brief consideration of this remarkable passage, in which YHWH comes down on a mountain to reveal himself to Israel.

The relatively straightforward literary structure of Exod 19-24 belies an inner complexity making it nearly impossible to read as a continuous narrative.²⁷ The details of that complexity are considerably beyond the scope of the present study, but the following literary units are apparent.

Preparations for the Theophany (19:1-15)

Theophany at Sinai (19:16-25)

Ten Commandments (20:1-21)

Book of the Covenant (20:22–23:33)

Covenant Ceremony (24:1-18)

In particular, Exod 19:16-19 itself is a sub-paragraph of the divine appearance at Sinai. Here at the mountain of God, Israel experienced YHWH in thunder and lightning, thick cloud, trumpet blast, smoke enfolding the mountain, fire, and finally, the violent shaking of the mountain itself.²⁸ Without getting into the details of this pyrotechnic display, it is sufficient to observe that this is a remarkable, and remarkably obscure, example of ancient Near Eastern theophany. As we have seen, ancients expected to encounter deity in human-form, animal-form, or some admixture of the two. This is truly a remarkable “theophany” because, in point of fact, we have no actual theophany at all; this is no appearance of YHWH as such. What we have is a description of the dramatic effects of YHWH’s advent, describing what is occurring around, above, and beneath God’s actual physical arrival at Sinai. Like other theophanies we have surveyed, the text carefully avoids any suggestion of the physicality of God. Yet here we actually do have details of what is seen (and heard!) unlike the occurrences of **r/b* in the ancestral narratives.

Despite the differences with earlier theophanies, the central observation I offer here is that the same pattern is at work in the Sinai narrative; that is, the text minimizes the physicality of God in order to move immediately to the verbal content. In the great Sinai revelation of Exod 19-24, the principle of accommodation allows for much more dramatic and profound descriptions of the effects of YHWH’s appearance. Yet the impact of that appearance is nuanced even further in Deut 4, a theological treatise based on this very movement from physical appearance to content-based revelation. This great sermonic discourse asserts that the Israelites of the wilderness generation were eyewitnesses of miraculous events, “signs and wonders” and “terrifying displays of power,” which they must never forget (Deut 4:9,34-35). They themselves stood before YHWH at Horeb, while God declared the reason for their presence at the foot of the mountain was to hear his “words” in order to learn to fear him and to teach his words to their children (v. 10). As we shall see, the “words” in view are the Ten Commandments, and the legal stipulations and ordinances derived from them.²⁹ One of the central points of the discourse is precisely what the Israelites saw at the foot of the mountain – or more to the point, what they did not see. Standing before YHWH at Mount Sinai, the Deuteronomy parallel focuses on the blaze and smoke (v. 11) of Exod 19:16-19, leaving off, for the moment, the thunder, lightning, and trumpet blast. In that setting and at that moment, YHWH “spoke” (*wayyāḏabbēr*) to the Israelites from the midst of the fire

(v. 12), which is unprecedented in human history: “has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire” (v. 33). Pressing the point, Moses explains “you heard the sound of words” (*qôl debārîm*) but “you saw no form” (*tēmûnâ*, “form, likeness, representation”; that is, no cultic image).³⁰ There was nothing to see – “only a voice.”³¹ The next verse (v. 13) drives home even further the content of YHWH’s speech with increasing specificity. He “declared” (*wayyaggēd*) to the wilderness generation “his covenant” (*bārîto*), which is here defined as the Ten Words (*‘ăšeret haddābārîm*, aka, the Ten Commandments). The smoke, fire, trumpet blast – all of it – is there merely as backdrop for the central feature of Israel’s relationship with YHWH. The covenant, with its life-giving and life-sustaining Ten Words, comprises the sole content of the revelation of YHWH. All else is accompaniment in order to make it memorable. And this is remarkably highlighted further by the closing words of v. 13: “then he [YHWH] wrote them (*wayyiktābēm*) on two stone tablets.” By YHWH’s own handwriting and signature the process is now complete (cf. 9:10; Exod 31:28); divine appearance has been minimized in order to move to spoken word of revelation, and from spoken word to written word.³²

The introduction to both renditions of the Ten Commandments begins with an assertion of God speaking (Exod 20:1; Deut 5:4).³³ And in both cases, the beginning of divine speech is a first person self-revealing “I am YHWH your God” (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6), similar to revelatory speech to the ancestors.³⁴ Critical scholarship on both the Sinai Revelation of Exod 19-24 and Deuteronomy’s re-use of these materials, has long noted that the Decalogue interrupts the narrative of the Sinai theophany, and this has led to a consensus that the Ten Commandments were secondarily inserted into the narrative.³⁵ Others have shown that, despite the loose connection between the Decalogue and its immediate narrative context, there are nevertheless literary links that may be taken as indications the Decalogue is critical to the narrative of the book of Exodus in its canonical form.³⁶ While most still assume the Ten Commandments were a later intrusion in the text, a synchronic reading of Exodus 19-24 cannot miss this point. A distinct literary progression from appearance to communication is paralleled in nearly every respect by the ancestral narratives of Genesis. That is, a dramatic, divine self-revelation is quickly minimized in its effects, without specific description of God’s physicality, in order to introduce verbal communication from YHWH, in which he initiates a covenant relationship.

Our doctrine of revelation needs to be mindful of this movement in the text from divine appearance to verbal content. Ultimately, God is not known through the physical or phenomenological context of the Sinai theophany, even for the ancient Israelites. The articulation of the nature of YHWH in Israel’s

covenant and its Ten Words illustrates that he cannot be understood by means of thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire, but only through the verbal articulation of his covenanting love for Israel, and then only “dimly” and “in part.”³⁷ As Christopher Wright puts it, “The very heart of Israel’s creedal faith is addressed to their ears (in explicit contrast to their eyes – ‘you saw no form’) as something to be heard and heeded – a disclosure of reality that is both propositional and relational.”³⁸ This investigation has confirmed, through an examination of the lexical and syntactical specifics of YHWH’s appearances in Genesis and Exodus, what was observed many years ago by James Thomson regarding the twofold nature of divine revelation in the Old Testament:

Everywhere in the Old Testament the activity of God as a medium of His self-disclosure is wedded to the Word of God. So closely connected are they that the act and the Word are sometimes synonymous; and if not identical, they are simultaneous. It would seem that often the activity without the Word could not be a medium of revelation.³⁹

Implications for Our Understanding of Revelation and Scripture

In an earlier era of biblical interpretation, it was commonly and widely assumed that Jewish authors of the post-exilic period killed the vibrant religion of Israel’s prophets, and entombed it in the law. Wellhausen’s famous dictum that the law of Moses was not “the starting-point for the history of ancient Israel” but rather “for that of Judaism” was a turning point in biblical interpretation.⁴⁰ His language for early Judaism’s law was often laced with themes of death, dying, and decay:

The great pathologist of Judaism [the Apostle Paul] is quite right: in the Mosaic theocracy the cultus became a pedagogic instrument of discipline. It is estranged from the heart; its revival was due to old custom, it would never have blossomed again of itself. It no longer has its roots in child-like impulse; it is a dead work, in spite of all the importance attached to it, nay, just because of the anxious conscientiousness with which it was gone about. At the restoration of Judaism the old usages were patched together in a new system, which, however, only served as the form to preserve something that was nobler in its nature, but could not have been saved otherwise than in a narrow shell that stoutly resisted all foreign influences.⁴¹

In another place, Wellhausen opined, “it is a thing which is likely to occur, that a body of traditional practice should only be written down when it is threatening to die out, and that a book should be, as it were, the ghost of a life which is closed.”⁴²

Of course, Wellhausen's position has been widely critiqued because of his embedded anti-Semitism, and his failure to allow the possibility that legal materials (oral or written) may originate early in a society's history.⁴³ In light of the results of this brief investigation, quite the opposite of Wellhausen's view should be said of early Judaism and its impulse to become a religion "of the book" (as said often in the Qur'an's "people of the book"). In fact, we might suggest that, instead of the gradual killing of Israel's religious vitality, it was the great insight and genius of the exile, or perhaps later with the scribe Ezra and the Jews of the post-exilic period, that the proponents of earliest Judaism realized the intent of divine revelation all along, and therefore it is to Judaism's credit that they preserved, copied, and continued to develop the written Torah. In this case, we owe a great debt to Judaism, and we understand the Apostle Paul, not as Judaism's "great pathologist," as though he were diagnosing all that was wrong with Judaism, but as the first framer of a new Judaism in light of the arrival of the Messiah.

At the outset of this investigation, I observed that writing and text composition in the ancient world was a nearly mystical or numinous thing. At some point in Israel's history, an important transition occurred from the power of speech to the power of the written word. The advent of the written text as a source of authority was transformative. Now, a recorded text could be just as authoritative and powerful as a spoken word. We cannot know precisely when this idea first took root in ancient Israel, but the book of Deuteronomy dramatically reflects the process, as a written Torah of Moses meant to replace God's copy of the Ten Words, and indeed, the man Moses himself.⁴⁴ God wrote laws on stone tablets; Moses wrote the Torah in a book. Like the stone tablets, the Torah is deposited with the priests in the Ark of the Covenant, which means of course, it is not accessible. But Deuteronomy is available. The book of Deuteronomy has become a surrogate for another book – the Torah, and for the prophet Moses himself. At some point in history, Old Testament believers came to value the authority of written texts as few cultures before them had. The transition from the power of speech to the power of the written text provides insight into the very origins of the Old Testament itself. The newly inscripturated word was almost immediately accepted as a text with its own innate religious authority.

And this also helps us understand the concept of "scripture" and why it remains so central for the Church today. We believe "that this world is not self-explanatory and that some communication from beyond it is necessary to explain it;"⁴⁵ that communication is itself divine revelation. The biblical data indicate a movement in the text from divine self-revealing or appearance to divine verbal articulation of God's purposes and plans for, first the ancestors, and then for all

Israel. In fact, the data investigated here suppress or minimize the physicality of those appearances as part of an intense focus instead on verbal communication with humanity. These earliest expressions of divine self-revealing in the Bible add depth perception and perspective to the Great Tradition of ancient Israel preserved in the Sinai Revelation itself.⁴⁶

There is a homiletical payoff to all this. These appearances to Abraham and Moses are warnings that we humans have not changed much since their day: our lust for the sensational means we miss the profound. Rather than striving to behold what is not suitable for mere humans to attain, we should celebrate with Christians everywhere and in all centuries, the word that God “has *made known*”⁴⁷ to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9-10, NRSV).⁴⁸ And like Father Abraham and Moses, the Apostle Paul responded to God’s revelation with praise and thanksgiving (Gen 12:7; Exod 24:1; Eph 1:3-14), modeling for us the proper Christian response to divine revelation.

End Notes

¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology, Volume One: The Living God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987:17), and on the distinction between general and special revelation see pages 17-26; Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014:33-39); and specific to the Old Testament, see Dale Patrick, *The Rhetoric of Revelation in the Hebrew Bible*, OBT (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016: §105, p. 82), emphasis added.

³ So, for example, should we think of revelation as propositional doctrine, as history, as inner experience, as dialectical presence, as new awareness, or as symbolic mediation? See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, 2 vols. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013: 1:36-54). While this brief investigation makes no attempt to resolve these questions unequivocally, the textual data presented here address divine self-disclosure in the Pentateuch as a combination of the first two of these options.

⁴ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, OTL, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961: 1:37-38 and 58); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1962: 1:8). In recent decades, Walter Brueggemann and John Goldingay have reinvigorated the discussion of Old Testament theology by focusing on the narrative theology of the Hebrew scriptures, following the canonical order of a series of divine acts, or in Brueggemann’s case, an

adaptation of the biblical metaphor of “trial,” Israel’s own testimony about YHWH. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003, 2006, and 2009). Neither, however, has adequately addressed the intentionality of God’s self-disclosure to Israel’s ancestors in Genesis. Brueggemann explores God as the subject of Israel’s utterance, which is (metaphorically) stated in the sentence as the unity of testimony, having an active and transformative verb (which we may think of as causative Hiphils), and a direct object, the one transformed by the action, constituting the full sentence of Israel’s testimony, which then *becomes* or is *taken as* revelation. (We cannot address here the problem of historicity or ontology in Brueggemann’s approach, which raises altogether different sets of questions.) Yet surprisingly, even when he specifically addresses the verbs used in Israel’s predicative theologizing about God, Brueggemann fails to take up the significance of YHWH’s “appearance” to the ancestors. Israel’s core theologizing is marked by verbs of transformation; God “creates,” “promises,” “delivers,” “commands,” and “leads” (145-202). In Brueggemann’s model, “testimony becomes revelation,” by which he means that the “testimony that Israel bears to the character of God is taken by the ecclesial community of the text as a reliable disclosure about the true character of God” (121-22). To his categories, I propose adding “YHWH, the God Who Reveals (Himself),” and without denying entirely his “transportation from testimony to revelation,” I also believe the concept of revelation itself was more central to Israel’s core theologizing, and that this can be seen by observing the use of another verb in the books of Genesis and Exodus, as we shall see. Goldingay helpfully focuses on the narrative sequence, following the order of God’s acts: God began, started over, promised, delivered, sealed, gave, accommodated, wrestled, preserved, and sent. Although he takes up the topic of YHWH’s appearances to the ancestors, he too fails to capture the degree to which the text characterizes self-revelation in Genesis as paradigmatic for later Israel. He seems to equate the collocation under discussion here as literally “visual” in some way, although he does not explain what he has in mind (1:247). He also mistakenly avers that Gen 17:1 (treated below) “is the first report of YHWH’s appearing to anyone” (1:247). In some ways, this investigation is intended to supplement their work. The closest I have found to the approach advocated here was fifty years ago in a book by J. Kenneth Kuntz, who emphasized both the “visual and audible aspects of divine manifestation” in the Old Testament; *The Self-revelation of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967: 40-41, and see further 52-56, 62-65, and 120-21).

⁵ Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East*, SBLWAW 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013: 363).

⁶ Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 342-43. On the concept of “theophany” or the appearance of God, Jörg Jeremias has investigated certain Old Testament texts as representative of a distinct literary genre (Judg 5:4-5; Deut 33:2; Hab 3:3; Ps 68:8-11; Mic 1:3-4; Amos 1:2; Ps 46:7, and Isa 19:1); Jörg Jeremias, *Theophanie: Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung*, WMANT 10 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965). Jeremias describes such appearances as intrusions into the life of Israel, exhibiting YHWH’s ferocious power; the divine presence “comes” (*bw*) from a specific place, with disruptive and cataclysmic intrusions in nature, and leaves a changed situation. The ancestral appearances covered here are related, although “come” is not part of the formula. See Bill T. Arnold, “בוא,” *NIDOTTE* 1:615-18; Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “Theophany, Theology of,” *NIDOTTE* 4:1247-50.

⁷ For this metaphor, see David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005: 4-5); and John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon*, Hulsean Lectures 1990 (London: SPCK, 1997: 129).

⁸ Some have proposed “plain” or “valley”; *DCH* 5:188; and see Yoel Elitzur, “Moreh,” *NIDB* 4:140. On the other hand, the evergreen Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*) covered large areas of the central hill country in antiquity, and the oak “of the valley” is unlikely. We know that trees held religious significance throughout the ancient Near East as physical symbols of divine presence; Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and The Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 261 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998: 20-48).

⁹ All translations are the author’s, unless otherwise designated.

¹⁰ The so-called “tolerative” variation of the reflexive N-stem; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018: §3.1.2,c); Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990: 390-91).

¹¹ Arnold and Choi, *Guide*, §3.5.1,d; Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, 551-52; Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006: 364).

¹² Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, 551.

¹³ One is also reminded that YHWH does not see as mortals see because he looks upon the heart; 1 Sam 16:7.

¹⁴ Ernst Axel Knauf, “Shadday,” *DDD*², 749-53; Ernst Axel Knauf, “El Šaddai - der Gott Abrahams?” *BZ* 29 (1985: 97-103). This predicate nominative (or, copular-complement) for identification is paralleled by similar syntax for divine disclosure at 15:1 and 15:7, showing the variety of speech possible for unique divine revelation; Arnold and Choi, *Guide*, §2.1.2 and 5.1.1,a.

¹⁵ The two here are likely hendiadic, “walk blamelessly before me”; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009: 169).

¹⁶ For details, see Arnold, *Genesis*, 169.

¹⁷ For the significance of the occurrence at 22:14 in wordplay on the name “YHWH will provide,” see Arnold, *Genesis*, 207-8. The N-stem of *r’h occurs a total of 14 times in Genesis, 6 in the past narrative and 4 in other forms, all in theophanic contexts, and an additional 4 times in non-theophanic contexts listed above. By contrast, Jacob’s dream of God’s ziggurat (Gen 28:10-22), like a highway to and from heaven, does not use N-stem *r’h for “appearance,” but includes a theatrical display. Perhaps the literary intent here is precisely to draw such a contrast with Abram, for initial revelation to Jacob comes as a dream, and included pyrotechnic effects made possible because it was only a dream. Again, much can be explained by way of divine accommodation, and especially to the would-be patriarch, Jacob. See Arnold, *Genesis*, 251-56.

¹⁸ God's revelation to us is not always straightforward. On Calvin's view of accommodation, see Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*, 32: As one cares for an infant, God's revelation is something like the lisping way we speak to small children; that is, "God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us," and that "such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity."

¹⁹ In the rest of the OT, we have only one instance of God's form appearing, and that to none other than Moses himself (Exod 33:12–34:9). Elsewhere, in contexts in which God appears to humans, a form of the "messenger/angel" of YHWH/God appears; for example, Gen 16:7; 21:17; 22:11; Judg 13:3.

²⁰ Israel had a priestly tradition on "seeing God," which likewise never stressed what was actually seen. This may be the tradition's way of guarding against iconic tendencies, although some have assumed a "primitive" associative experience or a mediated presence through the cultic apparatus; Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 428–29, n.32. However, in our examples, the ancestor often built an altar immediately following the appearance, so that we have a different tradition with different assumptions at work. The cult apparently had nothing to do with these appearances, at least not initially. One should also note that, in Genesis, "a divine revelation engendered faith in the first Patriarchs"; Herbert C. Brichto, "On Faith and Revelation in the Bible," *HUCA* 39 (1968: 35–53, esp. 44).

²¹ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

²² Note the recurrence of *r'h five times in Exod 3:2–4, plus one occurrence of the noun *mar'eh*, "appearance."

²³ The *mal'ak YHWH/Elohim* occurs 66 times in the Old Testament, not only as a messenger delivering God's words but also as an agent authorized to perform them. As in this text, the messenger is often indistinguishable from God himself; see D. N. Freedman and B. E. Willoughby, "מַלְאָךְ," *TDOT* 8:308–25, esp. 317–20.

²⁴ Perhaps a multicolored bramble bush, *Cassia obovate*; *HALOT* 2:760; *DCH* 6:172.

²⁵ In addition, we have four occurrences in the perfect, third person, masculine, singular, in which cases YHWH, or the glory of YHWH, is said to have *appeared* (Exod 3:16; 4:1,5; 16:10), and one occasion in which YHWH declares that his face will not *be seen* (Exod 33:23). Thus the N-stem of *r'h in revelatory contexts occurs seven times in Exodus, in addition to eight additional occurrences in non-theophanic settings: Exod 13:7[2x]; 23:15,17; 34:3,20,23,24 (and cf. 1 Sam 3:21).

²⁶ Arnold, *Genesis*, 135–36. It seems entirely possible that earliest Israelite perceptions thought of YHWH as having human form, although von Rad says this is the wrong way of thinking about it, as though ancient Israel "regarded God anthropomorphically" when in reality the reverse is true; Israel "considered man as theomorphic"; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962: 1.145, and see 219).

²⁷ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009: 432-35); John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987: 258-60); William Henry C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006: 141-54).

²⁸ The mountain “trembled” (v. 18, *wayyehērad*; G-stem past narrative of **hrd*) exceedingly (NRSV’s “violently”), which creates wordplay on the trembling of the people at the crescendo of trumpet blast (*wayyehērad*; v. 16).

²⁹ And the specific phraseology here is critical, as YHWH asserts in Deut 4:10 that the moment is one in which he will cause Israel to hear the words; *wə’ašmi’ēm*, H-stem of **šm’*.

³⁰ Not denoting a particular shape, but any shape or visible form at all; *HALOT* 4:1746; *DCH* 8:640; E.-J. Waschke, “מִצֵּי־הָאֵשׁ,” *TDOT* 15:687-90.

³¹ The preposition *zûlâ* after a negated clause excludes the possibility of anything beyond the object of the preposition; *HALOT* 1:267; *DCH* 3:97.

³² Near the conclusion of Moses’ discourse, we have the remarkable v. 36, emphasizing the two perspectives of the revelation: from heaven, YHWH made Israel hear his voice in order to instruct them, and upon earth, YHWH showed them (**r’h*, H-stem) the fire and they heard his words.

³³ In Deuteronomy’s version, YHWH spoke face-to-face with Israel from the midst of the fire, just as he had with Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:4). Moses’ experience of YHWH at Sinai had now become the experience of every Israelite. On the relational nature of divine revelation, see John N. Oswalt, “Discipleship and the Bible: Foundations,” in *Discipleship: Essays in Honor of Dr. Allan Coppedge*, ed. Matt Friedeman (Wilmore, KY: Teleios and Francis Asbury Press, 2017: 1-11, esp. 2-3).

³⁴ Again, predicates nominative for identification, as we saw in Gen 15:1,7; 17:1, and elsewhere in the ancestral narratives.

³⁵ For a survey of the problem from Wellhausen to the present, see Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 419-24 and 469-72; Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 141-54. Childs assumed the Decalogue’s great antiquity through oral tradition, despite its current literary location stemming from late redactional activity; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974: 391-92).

³⁶ Dominik Markl, “The Ten Words Revealed and Revised: The Origins of Law and Legal Hermeneutics in the Pentateuch,” in *The Decalogue and Its Cultural Influence*, ed. Dominik Markl, Hebrew Bible Monographs 58 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013: 13-27, esp. 14-19); Brichto, “Faith and Revelation,” esp. 47-48.

³⁷ It may be true that the nature of YHWH cannot be understood by other means because of “His immaterial and spiritual essence,” but that may not have been the ancestor’s experience, who may have indeed seen a physical reflection of his nature. Shalom Albeck, “The Ten Commandments and The Essence of

Religious Life,” in *Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, ed. Ben-Zion Segal (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990: 261-89, esp. 265). My point here is that the text has assiduously suppressed that aspect of divine revelation.

³⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004: 463).

³⁹ James G. S. S. Thomson, *The Old Testament View of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960: 13).

⁴⁰ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994: 1); repr. of Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Enzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), trans. of Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 2d ed. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1883).

⁴¹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 425.

⁴² Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 405, n.1. For penetrating assessment of Wellhausen’s view of Judaism as Israelite religion after it has died, see Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1993: 10-15).

⁴³ Bill T. Arnold and David B. Schreiner, “Graf and Wellhausen, and Their Legacy,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 3: The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017: 252-73, esp. 263-65); Moshe Weinfeld, *The Place of the Law in the Religion of Ancient Israel*, VTSup 100 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004).

⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy*, Biblical Interpretation Series 14 (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1997: 246-59).

⁴⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among The Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009: 12). We must therefore also reject the old classical liberalism and its understanding of revelation as “human insight into religious truth, or human discovery of religious truth,” in which case the inspiration of the Bible is only its power to inspire religious experience; see Bernard L. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970: 64-65).

⁴⁶ The authors and final redactors of the Pentateuch envisioned a Torah that was literarily closed at the time of Moses’ death because there would be no divine revelation after Moses (Deut 4:2; 13:1 [Eng 12:32]). From that point forward, it was the task of priestly scribal scholars to interpret the Torah as the only divine basis for faith. It is also possible that prophetic circles of the postexilic period believed, to the contrary, that divine revelation continued into the days of the exilic and postexilic prophets. See Eckart Otto, “Scribal Scholarship in the Formation of Torah and Prophets: A Postexilic Scribal Debate between Priestly Scholarship and Literary Prophecy – The Example of the Book of Jeremiah and Its Relation to the Pentateuch,” in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance*, eds. Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007: 171-84).

⁴⁷ γνωρίσας, aorist, active, participle of γνωρίζω, “make known, disclose; know.”

⁴⁸ Cf. Rom 1:16-17; Heb 1:1-4, 2 Tim 3:16-17.

