

The Visual and Auditory Presentation of God on Mount Sinai¹

SUNNY WANG

Central Taiwan Theological Seminary

sunny@teamtc.tw

In the OT there are two accounts of theophany recorded in Exod 19–20 and Deut 4–5. Some scholars thus argue that Deut 4 is constructed in such a way as to show that hearing is superior to sight. This paper argues that the senses of sight and hearing are used together to attain knowledge of God and that this interrelation between seeing and hearing is intended. The account of theophany on Mount Sinai is used as an example to show that seeing and hearing are often mingled to complement each other. The presence of God is experienced through hearing the voice of God and seeing God speaking out of fire, cloud, and smoke on the mountain. There is no sign to prove that one sense is superior to the other in the account of theophany. They are both means by which to experience God.

KEYWORDS: *senses, sight, hearing, theophany, knowledge of God, epistemology*

It is through human senses that one perceives God and the world. Thus a range of verbs relating to the five senses is found in the OT,² but not all of the senses receive the same emphasis in terms of number of occurrences. In ancient society (as in modern times), seeing and hearing were the most prominent senses and are sometimes called the “high senses.”³

1. I sincerely thank the editors and the anonymous *JESOT* reviewers for their insightful feedback and comments which helped improve this article’s clarity and argument; however, I am responsible for all remaining flaws.

2. Avrahami’s study explores all of the senses in the OT. Y. Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 545; New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

3. The sense of sight is regarded as the highest sense and the lowest one is usually touch. See R. Jèutte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Oxford: Polity, 2005), 63. The sense of hearing is seen as “the bridge” between the “highest” sense of

This is the same case as in the OT. These two senses are the most significant ones in the epistemic process. There is, however, a debate of whether the sense of sight is superior to the sense of hearing or whether the sense of hearing is superior to the sense of sight in the OT.

In 1960 Boman proclaimed the idea that hearing was the crucial sense by means of which the Israelites learned about the world. He argued that, for the Hebrew, the sense of hearing was the most important sense “for the experience of truth (as well as various kinds of feelings), but for the Greek it had to be his sight.”⁴ Even though Barr argued against this view in 1961,⁵ Stephen Geller in his article repeats it and argues that Deut 4 is constructed in such a way as to show that hearing is superior.⁶ Carasik picked up this issue years later and again used Deuteronomy to argue that it is seeing, not hearing, which has the central place in the Israelites’ understanding of how people acquire knowledge about the world.⁷ He asserts that Boman’s argument “comes not from an analysis of Israelite modes of thought, but from the attempt to contrast ‘Hebrew mentality’ with ‘Greek mentality.’”⁸

sight and the “lower” senses of smell, taste, and touch. M. M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 41.

4. T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM, 1960), 206. Jay accepts the view that vision was central for the Greeks as well. See M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36.

5. In his book, Barr explains the intellectual background of Boman’s concept. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 46–58. See also, J. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1962), 137–42.

6. S. A. Geller, “Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4,” *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 103–39. He argues, “Dt 4 has established a context in which ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ are contrasted rather than combined in the common hendiadys. Not only does he oppose the terms to each other, but also orders them religiously: ‘hearing’ is promoted, ‘seeing’ demoted in significance as regards revelation, and, by extension, all religious experience” (p. 113).

7. M. Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 38.

8. *Ibid.*, 33. For criticism of Boman’s work, see W. K. Bechtold, “The Eyes of Both of Them Were Opened: A Rhetorical-Theological Analysis of the Theme of Visual Perception in the Narrative of Genesis” (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 8.

The question that arises from this debate is whether this division of epistemology into either visual or auditory is legitimate. If one embraces the view that a particular sense is primary in the epistemic process, then he or she is suggesting that one sense is superior to the other in epistemology. Many biblical narratives, however, suggest otherwise. Sight and hearing are often complementary. For example, in Jacob's story, God made himself known to Jacob through a vision in a dream. The account of his dream is as followed:

And he dreamed [and behold (וַיִּהְיֶה)] there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and [behold (וַיִּהְיֶה)] the angels of God (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים) were ascending and descending on it. And [behold (וַיִּהְיֶה)] the Lord stood (נִצַּב) beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. . . . Know [and behold (וַיִּהְיֶה)] that I am with you and will keep (שָׁמַר)⁹ you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen 28:12–15)¹⁰

The visual aspect of Jacob's dream is described by four clauses beginning with הִנֵּה.¹¹ While the first three clauses beginning with הִנֵּה (Gen 28:12, 13) are followed by visual images, namely, a ladder, the angels of God, and the Lord himself, the last one (Gen 28:15) is actually followed by God's utterance. The repetition of הִנֵּה rhetorically shifts Jacob's (and also the readers') attention from what he sees to what he hears.¹² The visual elements provide sound evidence for Jacob to trust in the promise that he heard from God. Jacob's perception of God will not be complete if he only sees God without hearing his words. In this passage, we see the interrelation of seeing and hearing. Both are significant in the epistemic process.

9. This is the only place in Genesis where God is the subject of שָׁמַר, and before that this verb is usually used to refer to men keeping God's covenant or commandments. Bechtold, "Visual Perception," 164.

10. All translations are working from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

11. For the function of this term הִנֵּה, see F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 95.

12. Bechtold, "Visual Perception," 165.

Similarly, in Job 42:5–6, we see the juxtaposition of the senses of seeing and hearing.¹³ Job’s knowledge of God is not based solely on the sense of hearing or seeing but on both. Only after he hears and sees God, he gains adequate knowledge of God.

In the book of Zechariah, the prophet sees many visions but he does not understand them until God’s angelic interlocutor explains their meaning to him. In other words, Zechariah needs both senses of seeing and hearing to comprehend God’s will. Some might argue that this shows hearing is the primary sense of perceiving God.¹⁴ However, without seeing these visions, Zechariah cannot perceive the divine fully. Besides, the fact that the phrase “I looked up and saw” repeats throughout the book of Zechariah (Zech 1:18; 2:1; 5:1, 9; 6:1; 12:10) and the word עין (“eye”) appears 17 times while ראה (“to see”) appears 20 times, all indicate that the sense of sight is emphasised. For Zechariah, seeing visions and hearing angel’s words are both indispensable in understanding God’s will.

Thus, I argue that it is illegitimate to emphasise one sense over the other in Hebrew epistemology because sight and hearing are often used together in a significant way. In many instances these two senses are combined, such as in “hearing the voice of the sign” (Exod 4:8) or “seeing the sound” (Exod 20:18).¹⁵ This suggests that this interrelation between seeing and hearing is intended, in particular, in the epistemic process.

In the following two parts of this article, I will first briefly survey the use of sight and hearing in relation to knowledge and show that both senses are seen as a way of acquiring knowledge in an epistemic process. Then I will use the account of theophany on Mount Sinai as an example to show that there is not a primary sense in attaining knowledge of God and dividing them is therefore unproductive because by doing so, one fails to grasp the significance of the interrelation between seeing and hearing and knowing God.

13. For detailed analysis of this passage, see below.

14. G. W. Savran, “Seeing Is Believing: On the Relative Priority of Visual and Verbal Perception of the Divine,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 326.

15. The combination of different senses is not uncommon. For synesthesia of senses, see L. E. Marks, *The Unity of the Senses: Interrelations among the Modalities* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

SIGHT, HEARING, AND KNOWLEDGE

Sight and Knowledge

The verb ראה (“to see”) occurs 1,299 times in the OT. The word עין (“eye”) occurs 868 times. This makes the sense of sight the most frequently referred to of the senses. For the Israelites, vision was not only the most important means by which to perceive the world but was also a metaphor for understanding.¹⁶ The vast number of occurrences of ראה and עין and the complexity of their usage makes it impossible to examine all the verses. As a result, I will focus mainly on the literal use of this verb, that is, seeing with physical eyes. The passages that I quote are selective but try to cover nearly every stage of Israel’s history to show that the sight-knowledge relationship emerges throughout the OT.

In the OT, seeing (ראה) and knowing (ידע) are closely related.¹⁷ For example, in Josh 3:3–4, Joshua comments to the people:

When you see (כראותכם) the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, so that you may know (תדעו) the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before.

In order to know where to go, the Israelites have to depend on their vision. In this instance, vision is the only way of obtaining knowledge. Similarly in Josh 3:7, the Lord said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight (בעיני) of all Israel, so that they may know (ידעו) that I will be with you as I was with Moses.” Although the verb of seeing is not used, “in the sight of” implies the act of seeing. Through seeing the exaltation of Joshua, the Israelites will know that God is with him.¹⁸

We find the juxtaposition of sight and knowledge in the Prophets as well. For example, in Ezek 14:23, “They shall console you, when you see (תראו) their ways and their deeds; and you shall know (ידעתם) that it

16. Carasik, *Theologies*, 43. Simcha Kogut offers a suggestion as how to interpret ראה. He suggests that when it is followed by a “single constituent,” it means “to see” whereas, if it is followed by a clause, it means “to perceive.” S. Kogut, “On the Meaning and Syntactical Status of הנה in Biblical Hebrew,” *ScrHier* 31 (1986): 133–54.

17. E.g., Exod 3:7; Lev 5:1; Num 24:16; Deut 29:3; 33:9; Isa 32:3. Note that in most of these occurrences, the sense of hearing appears as well.

18. See also Josh 3:10–11.

was not without cause that I did all that I have done in it, says the Lord God.”¹⁹ Observers will know the appropriateness of God’s actions when they see the ways and deeds of the recent arrivals (the survivors).²⁰ Similarly in Ezek 6:13, “And you shall know (ידעתם) that I am the LORD, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountain tops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing odor to all their idols.”²¹ Even though the verb of sight is not used, the vivid description of the green tree and the leafy oak shows that the sense of sight to which is being appealed. Knowledge of God is often expressed in relation to seeing a mighty act of God. Hence, Balaam describes himself as “the one who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees (יחזקה) the vision of the Almighty” (Num 24:16).

Carasik points out that הודיע (to make known), the Hiphil of ידע (to know), indicates that “it is God who causes, or is asked to cause, someone to know.”²² This is a correct observation, but, very often, when God makes himself known, he does it in a public and outward way which can be seen with human eyes. God makes himself known through his might and power (Jer 16:21) in visible acts. This is shown in Ezek 20:9, “But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight (לעיניהם) I made myself known (נודעתהי) to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.” In Ezek 39:21–22 God says, “I will display my glory (כבוד) among the nations; and all the nations shall see (וראו) my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know (ידעו) that I am the Lord their God, from that day forward.” All these passages indicate that sight and knowledge are closely related.

19. It has been thought that the “you” in Ezek 14:22–23 refers to the Babylonian exiles, but Brownlee argues that the “you” are the refugees from Jerusalem, whom Ezekiel met while he was in Egypt. W. H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1–19* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 209. Cooke points out that “you” could mean survivors who will bring their sons and daughters or that the sons and daughters are the survivors. G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 154; M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 2:261.

20. D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 452.

21. Cf. Deut 12:2; Hos 4:13.

22. Carasik, *Theologies*, 40.

Next we look at several texts in Exodus which also point to the sight-knowledge relationship. In the OT, God's glory is characteristically visible,²³ and thus is always used together with ראה, as in Exod 16:7: "in the morning you shall see (ראיתם) the glory (כבוד) of the LORD." This is the first theophany recorded and it happens because of the Israelites' complaint. The glory of God appears in a cloud and the whole congregation sees it (Exod 16:10).²⁴ God hears their complaint and will give them meat and bread, as a result of which they "shall know (וידעתם) that I am the LORD your God" (Exod 16:12). On the basis of this firsthand experience, the Israelites will come to know that YHWH is their God.

It is not only human knowledge that is connected to sense perception; divine knowledge is also expressed using anthropomorphic sense perception. In Gen 18:21 God says, "I must go down and see (ואראה) whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know (אדעה)." This shows that even for God, "seeing is believing"²⁵ and his knowledge is confirmed by seeing.²⁶ The Psalter praises the Lord because God sees and knows: "I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen (ראית) my affliction; you have taken heed (ידעת) of my adversities . . ." (Ps 31:7). Divine perception is also described in Exod 3:7, "Then the Lord said, 'I have observed (ראה) the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard (שמעתי) their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know (ידעת) their sufferings.'" Divine perception and divine knowledge are also indications that God is present with the Israelites in Egypt.²⁷

Our study shows that sight is considered as a way of acquiring knowledge in Hebrew epistemology, and is consistently so in nearly every stage of the history of Israel. We now turn to the relationship between hearing and knowledge.

23. The visibility of God's glory is also recorded in Exod 24:17. This shows that the visual aspect of God's glory is emphasised. As Savran points out, the glory of God is described as "a visible and palpable manifestation of the divine." G. W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (JSOTSup 420; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 49.

24. The manifestation of God's glory proves God's presence in the exodus from Egypt. Durham argues that God's glory is equal to God's presence. See J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 220.

25. Carasik, *Theologies*, 40.

26. For a thorough study on the sense of sight in Genesis, see T. Sutskover, *Sight and Insight in Genesis: A Semantic Study* (HBM 56; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013).

27. T. B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 126.

Hearing and Knowledge

The sense of hearing, like the sense of sight, plays a part in Hebrew epistemology.²⁸ Hearing as a way of acquiring knowledge may be observed in Job 5:27, “See, we have searched this out; it is true. Hear (שמענה), and know (דע) it for yourself.” Also, in Jer 6:18, “Therefore hear (שמעו), O nations, and know (ודעו), O congregation, what will happen to them.” In these two instances hearing is connected to acquiring knowledge.

Hearing is understood by the Hebrews as one means of knowing. People hear in order to get certain knowledge. When it comes to the knowledge of God, hearing is also an important means, especially in relation to the signs that God performed. Though signs are mostly seen, they can also be heard, namely in the form of a report, by those who are far away. This is witnessed in Isa 33:13, where the Lord says, “Hear (שמעו), you who are far away, what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge my might.” Moses also says that the Egyptians will hear how God leads Israel out of Egypt, leading them “in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night” (Num 14:13). To see a sign is a direct experience. To hear a report of a sign is an indirect experience. For those who do not see the signs themselves due to distance or time, they can still hear a report of these signs through the testimony of the Israelites (Ps 126:2). The signs that YHWH has performed then become a testimony to YHWH as the true God, and the proper response to that testimony is the acknowledging of God in worship as the true God. Thus, in Ps 22, there is a culmination of this, an expectation that the nations will hear and accept the testimony to YHWH: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Ps 22:27).²⁹

It is natural for people to visualise what they hear in words.³⁰ Thus, hearing the report of signs should have the same effect as seeing

28. M. Malul, *Knowledge, Control, and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture, and Worldview* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 2002), 145.

29. W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 129.

30. C. R. Hallpike, *The Foundations of Primitive Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 159.

those signs, that is, the report should lead them to honour God as the true God. This effect of hearing a report of signs is shown in the book of Joshua, where hearing of signs is recorded several times. First, the account of the people of Jericho hearing of the miracle of the drying up of the water of Red Sea reads:

For we have heard (שמענו) how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard (וּנְשַׁמַּעַת) it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. (Josh 2:10–11)

Then all the kings of the Amorites heard of the miracle of the drying up of the waters of the Jordan River. This is recorded in Josh 5:1:

When all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea, heard (כִּשְׁמַעַת) that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them, because of the Israelites.

The last example from Joshua is from chapter 9. When the inhabitants of Gibeon heard (שמעו) what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai (Josh 9:3), they came to make a covenant with Israel. They said to Joshua and the men of Israel:

Your servants have come from a very far country, because of the name of the Lord your God; for we have heard (שמענו) a report of him, of all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth. (Josh 9:9–10)

Hearing is, for the Hebrews, a way of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge of God is gained through hearing God's words and also through hearing reports of the miraculous acts of God. These reports appear in the form of testimony, thus an appeal to testimony can be seen

as another means of knowledge also.³¹ The sense of hearing is as significant as the sense of sight in the epistemology.

Sight, Hearing and Knowledge

Sight and hearing are also used together in the epistemic process, such as in Gen 18:21, Exod 3:7, Num 24:16, Isa 6:9–10, and Job 42:1–6. We will look at two passages in detail and show how these two senses are used complementarily in Hebrew epistemology. We first look at Job 42:1–6:

Then Job answered the LORD: ‘I know (ידעת) that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. “Hear (שמע), and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare (והודיע) to me.” I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear (לשמע אזן שמעתיר), but now my eye sees you (עיני ראתך); therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’

Job’s perception of God is mainly verbal, for God speaks to him out of the whirlwind. Thus his knowledge of God (Job 42:1) is based on his hearing of God’s utterance (Job 38–41).³² Yet his hearing is not the only means in the epistemic process, because his vision of God is what transforms his doubt to certainty (Job 42:5–6).³³ Thus Samuel Balentine concludes that Job “has now not only *heard* but also *seen* something about God . . .”³⁴ But the question remains, although Job claims that his eyes have seen God, there is no reference in Job 38–41 about Job’s vision of God. Thus, some take “my eye sees you (עיני ראתך)” metaphorically as a first-hand divine experience, which is in contrast with

31. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 119.

32. There is a debate of the meaning of שמע אזן. See further in Savran, “Seeing,” 337–338.

33. Reyburn argues that “now my eye sees thee” expresses Job’s knowledge of God as “an eye witness.” W. Reyburn, *A Handbook on the Book of Job* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 772.

34. S. Balentine, *Job* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 693.

“hearing,” a secondary experience passed on by tradition or hearsay. However, as Savran points out, when ראה is used with עין, it refers to actual sight and when this phrase is used together with hearing, the sense of seeing and hearing are usually parallel or complementary.³⁵ If ראה refers to actual sight, then Job 42:5 is indeed a theophany text.³⁶ Job did see God for the whirlwind is an indication that God reveals himself to Job.³⁷ It is through seeing and hearing God that Job’s knowledge of God is made complete.

In Isa 6:9–10 we also see an important statement about the relationship between seeing, hearing, and knowing. However, in order to understand this passage we should consider its context. At the beginning of Isa 6, Isaiah “saw (אראה) the Lord sitting on a throne” in the temple and seraphs were attending him (Isa 6:1–2). Isaiah hears the voice of seraphs proclaiming the holiness of God (Isa 6:3). He then identifies himself with his people of “the unclean lips.” In his fear, he affirms the fact that “my eyes (עיני) have seen (ראו) the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5). God removes the sins of Isaiah by touching his mouth with a live coal (Isa 6:6). Once Isaiah is purified, the voice of the Lord calls out, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responded, “Here am I; send me!” It is at this point that the message of Isa 6:9–10 is given.

This introduction helps us to understand the blindness and deafness in Isa 6:9–10. In Isa 6:1–6, Isaiah sees God and hears his words. First, he sees God sitting on the throne and does not harden his heart, but recognises that he is a sinner living among the people of unclean lips. Because of his repentant response, his sin is then forgiven. After he sees God, he hears the words of God. Again, rather than being insensitive, he responds immediately to God’s calling.³⁸ He is an example of one who sees and hears and understands (ידע). We now take a closer look at Isa 6:9–10:

35. Savran, “Seeing,” 336.

36. M. Burrows, “The Voice from the Whirlwind,” *JBL* 47 (1928): 117–32 128; J. G. Williams, “Deciphering the Unspoken: The Theophany of Job,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978): 60; Savran, “Seeing,” 338.

37. E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job, with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 340; E. L. Greenstein, “A Forensic Understanding of the Speech from the Whirlwind,” in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. M. V. Fox; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 241–58.

38. G. V. Smith, “Spiritual Blindness, Deafness, and Fatness in Isaiah,” *BibSac* 170 (2013): 172.

Go and say to this people: “Keep listening (שמעו שמוע), but do not comprehend (תבינו); keep looking (וראו ראו), but do not understand (ידע).” Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes (ראה בעיניו), and listen with their ears (באזניו ישמע), and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.

In this passage Isaiah asserts that the senses that used to be a means to mediate the knowledge of God cannot function properly, and this inability to understand and to know is due to the Israelites’ obduracy, spiritual impotence, and unresponsiveness. In this regard, sense perception is used metaphorically. But if we take the introduction of Isa 6:1–6 into consideration, we may come to a different conclusion.

In the narrative, Isaiah physically sees God and hears God’s words. Since Isa 6:9–10 follows immediately after Isaiah’s vision of God, it is legitimate to see Isaiah as an example of the one who sees, hears, and understands. Thus, the seeing and hearing in Isa 6:9 may be understood as physical seeing and hearing. Yet the seeing and hearing in verse 10 must be metaphorical, for Isaiah cannot physically blind the eyes and dull the ears of the people. This is how Uhlig understands it. He interprets the imperative verbs in Isa 6:9 as “literal imperatives,” and he considers the imperatives in Isa 6:10 as “figurative imperatives.”³⁹ We should note that Isaiah never makes it explicit whether he is referring to physical or spiritual blindness and deafness. In Isa 6:9–10, it could mean both. Thus we have here another example of how sight, hearing, and knowledge are related.

THEOPHANY ON MOUNT SINAI

We have shown that sight and hearing are both seen as a means of gaining knowledge of God, and there are many different ways of knowing God, such as seeing God’s signs and hearing the report of God’s mighty acts. Yet the most direct and significant event when God made

39. T. Uhlig, “Too Hard to Understand? The Motif of Hardening in Isaiah,” in *Interpreting Isaiah* (ed. D. G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson; Leicester: IVP Academic, 2009), 68.

himself known is the event that took place on Mount Sinai. God shows himself to the Israelites so that they can know him more closely.

The following study of this account of the theophany on Mount Sinai will show that the senses of sight and hearing are both indispensable in knowing God. One is not subservient to the other. We will look at two groups of passages in turn: the narratives in Exod 19–20 and Deut 4–5.

The Visual Presentation of God (Exod 19–20)

In Exodus, the narrative of the theophany contains extensive visual elements, such as smoke, fire, and cloud (Exod 19:16–18) and thus is often regarded as visual centered.⁴⁰ However, even when it seems to focus mainly on the sense of sight, auditory elements are mentioned. This can be seen in Exod 20:18, where we find the mixing of seeing and hearing modes of perception:

When all the people witnessed (ראים) the thunder (הקולת) and lightning, the sound (קול) of the trumpet, and [saw (וירא)] the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.

In the OT, קולת (thunder) can also be a reference to “the voice of God,” as in Exod 9:23 and in Ps 29:3.⁴¹ But because of the use of lightning, thunder is often regarded to be the best translation here.⁴² Since thunder cannot be seen, some English versions translate the verb ראים as to “witness” (NRSV) or “perceive” (RSV, ASV).⁴³ Even Samaritan Pentateuch (100 B.C.) tries to soften this by adding the verb of

40. M. Z. Brettler, “‘Fire, Cloud, and Deep Darkness’ (Deuteronomy 5:22): Deuteronomy’s Recasting of Revelation,” in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions About Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. L. T. Stuckenbruck, H. Najman and G. J. Brooke; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 24.

41. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 118.

42. M. Carasik, “To See a Sound: A Deuteronomic Rereading of Exodus 20:15,” *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 261. See also W. H. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 180.

43. Whether it is translated as “thunder” or “the voice of God,” the best verb to go with it would be שמע (“to hear”) rather than ראה (“to see”). The LXX, however, translates it literally as “to sound.”

hearing: “The whole people heard the thunder and the blare of the horn, and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain.”⁴⁴

However, there is no strong reason against our understanding of ראיִם literally as “to see.” That is, the people saw what is audible, the thunder and lightning.⁴⁵ Rabbi Akiba also understood this verse literally. He believes that what people have seen is what thought to be audible.⁴⁶ This is also how Philo interprets the Sinai event. In Decalogue 46–47 he stresses,

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 to hear them. 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 (ῥήματα) but deeds (ἔργα), which are judged by the eyes rather than the ears.⁴⁷

Some scholars are not critical of Philo’s use of “seeing the voice” rather than “hearing the voice” because this is how LXX reads literally in Exod 20:18, καὶ πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἑώρα τὴν φωνήν (And all people saw the voice).⁴⁸ Thus not many scholars pay much attention to this

44. S. D. Fraade, “Hearing and Seeing at Sinai: Interpretive Trajectories,” in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions About Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. L. T. Stuckenbruck, H. Najman and G. J. Brooke; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 252.

45. If we read the beginning of the verse as an extended circumstantial clause, then ראיִם modifies not only “thunder and lightning” but also “the sound of the trumpet.” In my view, this is the most natural reading of the clause. Cf. Propp’s translation: “Seeing the sounds and the torches and the horn’s sound and the mountain smoking . . .” Propp, *Exodus*, 2:181.

46. Cited from Fraade, “Hearing and Seeing,” 253.

47. Philo, *Decal.* 46–47; trans. F. H. Colson, LCL VII, 29–31.

48. NIV, KJV, NRSV and NLT all translate τὴν φωνήν/תּוֹרְקָה in Ex 20:18 as “the thunder.”

verse. It is not possible to discuss this issue in depth here, but it is very likely that Philo's privileging of sight made him prefer a literal reading of LXX, "seeing the voice" to rendering it "seeing the thunderings and lightnings" (KJV, NRSV, NIV). Also, his understanding of God's speech, as being radically different from human speech serves as a foundation for interpreting God's voice as visible. Most importantly, the speech of God can be interpreted as the thought of God, which only the eyes of the soul can see. The Logos of God is "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" (*Migr.* 48). As Philo says, "the voice of mortal beings is judged by hearing, the sacred oracles intimate that the word of God is seen as light is seen . . . virtue shining with intense brilliance, wholly resembling a fountain of reason" (*Migr.* 47). Thus for Philo, when speaking of human and divine relationships, sight and hearing are not "modes of sense perception" but are "as perceptual models that symbolised the relationship between human and divine."⁴⁹ Philo presents a "synesthesia" by which the eyes of the soul are capable of apprehending the voice of God because although God is beyond human experience, is accessible to human eyes somehow.⁵⁰

Propp, however, argues that "seeing thunder" is the Bible's classic example of "zeugma," when a verb or adjective logically modifies only one of a pair of nouns and thus causes incongruity. He adds, "Obviously, the people saw only the lightning and smoke; they heard the sounds."⁵¹ This explanation still does not answer the question of why the verb ראה is used instead of שמע.

Rashi and Iban Ezra offer other suggestions. Rashi agrees that they indeed "saw" a sound, something impossible to see in any other situation.⁵² Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, proposes that this might be due to the confusion of the human senses in "Israelite parlance and experience."⁵³ Nevertheless, the Israelites do make a clear distinction

49. D. Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 43.

50. *Ibid.*

51. See Cassuto, *Exodus*, 252.

52. Ibn Ezra, *The Commentators' Bible: Exodus* (trans. M. Carasik; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 164.

53. Ibn Ezra, *Exodus*, 164. Also cited by Carasik, "See a Sound," 262.

between the human senses in other passages.⁵⁴ The fact that this paradoxical language is again found in Exod 20:22, “The LORD said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: ‘You have seen (ראיתם) for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven,’” indicates that this paradoxical language is intended. Thus “seeing sound” would be understood to emphasise the unusual character of the theophany. A similar example can be found in 1 Kgs 19:13, where Elijah responds to what he hears by covering his face instead of covering his ears. The effect on both senses in this theophany is comparable to the Sinai event.⁵⁵ The integral use of seeing and hearing is not uncommon in the OT. For example, the psalmist in Ps 19:1–5 describes a visual revelation using terms which are associated with hearing while, in Ps 19:9–12, he expresses the verbal revelation of the Torah in terms of seeing.⁵⁶

We can see that in this visual presentation of God, the auditory elements remain significant. Sight and hearing are both indispensable in the epistemic process. This paradoxical use of sensory language is intentional for both theological and psychological reasons. Psychologically, we can use language “to translate one sensory mode into another.”⁵⁷ Therefore, we can visualise what we hear in words. According to Hallpike, there must be some kind of “logical” mechanism which allows us to transform sight messages into sound messages.⁵⁸ The paradoxical language creates an impact with “zeugma,” as Propp suggests, which shows how extraordinary this theophanic event is.

Theologically, seeing God is an impossibility, yet the Israelites have “seen” the voice of God and remain alive.⁵⁹ This radical and

54. Carasik argues, “the Deuteronomic school had a well-developed epistemology that distinguished carefully between the realms of seeing and hearing.” Carasik, “See a Sound,” 262.

55. Savran, *Encountering*, 219.

56. S. L. Klouda, “The Dialectical Interplay of Seeing and Hearing in Psalm 19 and Its Connection to Wisdom,” *BBR* 10 (2000): 194.

57. Hallpike, *Foundations*, 159.

58. *Ibid.*

59. The biblical evidence shows that some people have seen God. For example, the psalmist speaks of the certainty of seeing God (Pss 11:7; 17:15; 27:4, 13; 42:2). See also, Numb 12:8; Exod 24:9–11. But seeing God is also said to be an impossibility for it is fatal (Exod 33:20; cf. Exod 19: 21; Judg 6:22; 13:22). I do not try to solve this problem here, since several scholars have already investigated the theme of seeing God in the OT.

revolutionary expression of the vision of God is affirmed in Deut 5:24, “Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live.” “Seeing” the voice of God is a totally new experience for the Israelites and its purpose is to evoke their fear of God (Exod 20:21). More importantly, “seeing” the voice of God strongly implies a close relationship, as Moses emphasises to the Israelites in Deut 5:4, “The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.” The phrase, “face to face,” does not mean that the Israelites literally saw God’s face.⁶⁰ What it implies is a personal relationship between the Lord and the Israelites. As Carasik puts it, the significance of the revelation at Horeb is that “Israel could see the revelation—not merely the accompanying phenomena, but the actual revelation.” The announcement of commandments is a direct, personal experience.⁶¹ We may then conclude that by mixing the hearing and seeing modes of perception, the author seems to suggest that the revelation of God “requires the full sensory attention of its receiver.”⁶²

The Auditory Presentation of God (Deut 4–5)

It is widely accepted that the Deuteronomist(s) knew Exodus.⁶³ That means we have two accounts of Sinai theophany events. Many scholars believe that the Deuteronomists rework the Exodus material in a way as to downplay the ocular experience and thus highlight the auditory experience.⁶⁴ However, I will show that in this auditory presentation of

M. S. Smith, “‘Seeing God’ in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible,” *CBQ* 50 (1988): 171–83; A. S. Malone, “The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon,” *EvQ* 79 (2007): 311–29; A. T. Hanson, “The Treatment in the LXX of the Theme of Seeing God,” in *Septuagint, Scrolls and Cognate Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 557–68. On the physical presence of the divine, J. Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament,” *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 7 (1960): 31–38.

60. J. H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 61.

61. Carasik, “See a Sound,” 263.

62. Fraade, “Hearing and Seeing,” 267.

63. Carasik, “See a Sound,” 258; Brettler, “Deuteronomy 5:22,” 16.

64. For a list of scholarship, see Fraade, “Hearing and Seeing,” 252 n18. Brettler agrees that seeing and hearing are both important in bringing faith, but argues that the author of

God, one still finds visual elements which are indispensable in epistemology.

Compared with the narrative of theophany in Exodus, Deuteronomy adds some details, such as the Lord spoke “at Horeb out of the fire” (Deut 4:12, 15; 5:24).⁶⁵ It also emphasises the fact that the Israelites “saw no form, only a voice” (Deut 4:12, 15). While the Sinai event in Exodus is dominated by the visual, the recasting of the Sinai theophany in Deut 4 is often regarded as audio-centric.⁶⁶ Geller is a proponent of this view and argues that Deut 4 gives emphasis to hearing over seeing.⁶⁷ Deut 4:12 is often quoted in support of this view:

Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard (שמעו) the sound (קול) of words but saw (ראו) no form; there was only a voice (קול).

This statement is repeated again in Deut 4:15–16 in order to combat the possibility of idolatry.⁶⁸

Since you saw (ראיתם) no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female.

This passage is a combination of two ideas: the earlier tradition that God speaks from heaven and the prohibition of idols (Exod 20:22).

Deuteronomy 5 reworked Exodus material to show that hearing is believing. Brettler, “Deuteronomy 5:22,” 25.

65. Although some suggest that Sinai and Horeb are two different places, it is most plausible that these two refer to the same place. Cf. J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC 5; Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 107.

66. Savran, “Seeing,” 326.

67. See his discussion, S. A. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 1996), 30–61. For audio-centricity in the Deuteronomistic History, see H. Avalos, “Introducing Sensory Criticism in Biblical Studies: Audiocentricity and Visiocentricity,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. H. Avalos, S. J. Melcher and J. Schipper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 50–55.

68. See the discussion in Geller, *Enigmas*, 39–49.

Because God spoke from heaven and no form was seen, they should not make any image of him. This passage suggests no material presence of the Lord.⁶⁹ God reveals himself by the sound of word only.⁷⁰

When Moses addresses the Israelites to remind them about the mighty saving act of God, he also emphasises the sense of hearing. He says in Deut 4:32–33:

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings . . . ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of (הנשמע)? Have any people ever heard (השמע) the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard (שמעת), and lived?

All these verses in Deut 4 suggest that the auditory aspect is emphasised when recasting the theophany narrative. If we turn to Deut 5, we find extensive use of auditory terms, such as speak (דבר), hear (שמע) and voice (קול). Brettler thus argues that in Deut 5, revelation is only an auditory experience.⁷¹ We should take a closer look at Deut 5:22–25:

These words the LORD spoke (דבר) with a loud voice (קול גדול) to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me. When you heard (כשמעכם) the voice (הקול) out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire . . . and you said, “Look (הראנו), the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard (שמענו) his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen (רעינו) that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear (לשמע) the voice of the LORD our God any longer, we shall die.

Indeed, we see in this passage a strong emphasis on the sense of hearing, such as the “LORD spoke with a loud voice” (v. 22), “you heard the voice out of the darkness” (v. 23), “God may speak to someone” (v.

69. S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 66.

70. M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 204, 213.

71. Brettler, “Deuteronomy 5:22,” 25.

24) and “we hear the voice of the LORD.” Unlike in Exodus, where people are afraid of seeing God, in this passage people are afraid of hearing God. Despite the emphasis on hearing, there are appeals to visual images. For example, God’s voice came out of “the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness” (v. 23). When they have heard God, they have also seen “the mountain was burning with fire” (v. 23). The verb of sight is also used twice (v. 24). This shows that the sense of sight and hearing are being used in a parallel and complementary way. The fact that Deut 5 emphasises their fear of hearing God is to show that just as “seeing is believing,” “hearing is also believing.” Both sight and hearing are direct experiences of God and thus are equally significant.

In other parts of Deuteronomy we also find the emphasis of visual aspect. For example, Moses continuously reminds the Israelites of the events that “your own eyes saw” (Deut 7:19) or uses the phrase, “before your eyes” (Deut 1:30). Also, there are many occasions when the verbs used are of hearing but the description is visual. For example, in Deut 4:36, “From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire.”⁷² Note that the verb שמע is used with the vision of fire. The auditory revelation of God is combined with the visual revelation.

As we can see, some scholars argue from Deut 4 and 5 that God is present through the medium of his word, which is often compared with Exod 19–20. However, word (hearing) and event (seeing) are not separated here. The God who speaks is also the one who acts in signs and wonders (Deut 4:32–33). Israel knows God through his mighty acts, which are interpreted in “word-encounters.” This fusion of speech and act is close to Isa 40–55, in which God first says that he will deliver his people and then manifests his divine power (Isa 41:26–27; 43:9, 12).⁷³

Our examinations of these biblical passages show that the visual and auditory elements in theophany need not be seen as two separate elements.⁷⁴ On the contrary, they complement each other. Thus, McConville disagrees that Deuteronomy “represents a shift from vision

72. This verse solves the contradiction between the traditions that God descended upon Mount Sinai (Exod 19:20) and that God spoke out of heaven (Exod 20:22). M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 213; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 56.

73. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 115.

74. Savran, *Encountering*, 16.

to word.” Rather, he thinks that “word and actual encounter with Yahweh belong inseparably together.”⁷⁵

Looking at these two accounts of Sinai events, one might argue that there is a shift from visual (Exodus) to auditory (Deuteronomy) because there is a transition from experiential language to scribal language, in particular if a later date is ascribed to Deuteronomy material. However, as Deut 6 shows, God’s words are to be heard (Deut 6:4–6), but at the same time to be written, namely, to be seen (Deut 6:9).⁷⁶ Hearing and seeing represent two different ways of perceiving God but together they provide “the comprehensive biblical description of cognition.”⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

In the OT the senses of sight and hearing are both used in relation to knowledge. God makes himself known through his might and power in visible acts. Hearing is also understood by the Hebrews as one means of knowing. People hear in order to get certain knowledge. God is also depicted as the one who hears, sees and knows. Both seeing and hearing are used to describe theophany, and they are often mingled to complement each other. The presence of God is experienced through hearing the voice of God and seeing God speaking out of fire, cloud, and smoke on the mountain. There is no sign to prove that one sense is superior to the other in the account of theophany. They are both means by which to experience God. Our examinations of these biblical narratives show that the senses of seeing and hearing are not to be divided nor should we regard one sense as primary mode of perceiving God. These two senses are both indispensable in Hebrew epistemology and only through the attention of both senses, one can acquire a full revelation of God and thus show a proper response, that is to fear God.

75. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 107.

76. As Carasik points out, “we hear speech through the ear, but see writing with the eye.” Carasik, “See a Sound”: 258.

77. *Ibid.*