Torah texts describing the revelation at Mt. Sinai-Horeb emphasize the presence of God in sounds (נש) of thunder, accompanied by blasts of the Shofar, with fire and dark clouds (Exod 19:16-25; 20:18-21; Deut 4:11-12; 5:22-24). These dramatic, awe-inspiring theophanies reveal divine power and holy danger associated with proximity to divine presence. In contrast, Elijah’s encounter with God on Mt. Horeb in 1 Kings 19:11-12, begins with a similar audible, visual drama of strong, violent winds, an earthquake and fire—none of which manifest divine presence. Rather, it is מַחֲמָה מַרְדָּם מַרְדָּם, “a voice of thin silence” (v. 12) which manifests God, causing Elijah to hide his face in his cloak, lest he “see” divine presence (and presumably die). Revelation in external phenomena present a type of kataphatic experience, while revelation in silence presents a more apophatic, mystical experience. Traditional Jewish and Christian mystical traditions point to divine silence and darkness as the highest form of revelatory experience. This paper explores the contrasting theophanies experienced by Moses and the Israelites at Sinai and Elijah’s encounter in silence on Horeb, how they use symbolic imagery to convey transcendent spiritual realities, and speculate whether 1 Kings 19:11-12 represents a “higher” form of revelatory encounter.

Moses and Israel on Sinai: Three months after their escape from Egypt, Moses leads the Israelites into the wilderness of Sinai where they pitch camp at the base of Mt. Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain (v. 3) and receives an initial revelation from YHWH, that if they keep the covenant they will be blessed as a holy, priestly people. YHWH prepares Moses for an impending revelation in a “dense cloud,” from which the people will “hear me speaking” [to Moses] and hence be faithful (vv. 4-9). They must purify themselves to prepare for YHWH’s descent upon the mountain on the symbolic “third day.” YHWH sets limits for access to the mountain upon which divine holiness will be manifest; at the sound of the Shofar people may go up (vv. 10-15). Mount Sinai becomes a sanctuary. As Moses ascends the mountain on the morning of the third day, it becomes enmeshed in a dramatic audible and visual cosmic theophany of thunder (נש), heavy clouds (ךָנֶשׁ כָּנֶשׁ), lightning, and the blast of the Shofar (חָשְׁוֵנ קַנָּפָר; v. 16). Smoke and fire envelop the mountain, while an earthquake causes violent shaking and the shofar increases in volume as Moses speaks with God, who answers in “thunder” (ךָנֶשׁ כָּנֶשׁ; vv. 17-19). YHWH descends and Moses “goes up” (ךָנֶשׁ כָּנֶשׁ), receiving more instructions on boundaries and sanctification for people and their priests. Reference to the Shofar indicates a later, liturgical expression of the original event.

Moses descends and proclaims the Ten Commandments (20:1-17). This implies Moses received the Torah from YHWH during his ascent. Another dramatic theophany follows this proclamation: thunder, lightning, Shofar, and smoke on the mountain; this evokes fear and trembling among the people. They see (ךָנֶשׁ כָּנֶשׁ) “the voices/thunder” (ךָנֶשׁ כָּנֶשׁ), the flame, sound of the Shofar, and smoking mountain (20:18). Paradoxically, they “see” the “sound”; this seems to reflect an internal apprehension of God’s word which evokes awe and fear. Use of the active participle of “to see” implies an ongoing experience. I view this as a deliberate way of expressing profound internal revelatory experience which transcends expression in speech (e.g. Psalm 19:2-3). The continuous “seeing” implies ongoing interpretation and textual and verbal expression of an originally inaudible experience.
Moses stands apart; the people plead with him to mediate God’s word, lest they hear God directly and die. The people remain at a distance, while Moses approaches the “dark cloud [ᴇᴘ] where God was” (20:18-21; Ps 97:2). Modern scholarship views these texts as a compilation of J-E-P sources; the words for “sound/voice/thunder,” ᴏ FixedUpdate, and “cloud/dark cloud,” ᴆFixed, dominate our visualization of the scene. Thunder represents God’s voice while God’s presence remains concealed in clouds. This paradox evokes holy fear in people and upon creation which trembles. Baruch J. Schwartz notes how all the Torah presents God as communicating with human speech. In my view, what is expressed in the written texts interprets an originally inaudible perception accompanied by cosmological phenomena like thunder and dark clouds which inspire awe and self-transcendence.

Some scholars view the theophany in 20:15-18 as misplaced, speculating it originates in Chapter 19. Source tradition views P and J sections as visual rather than auditory, while E (19:15b-17; 19:19; chapter 20) depicts God speaking. The P and J versions exclude the Ten Commandments, focusing on visual revelatory events through which divine presence is perceived internally. Silence is indicative of priestly conceptions of the sanctuary embodying God’s invisible, ineffable, even dangerous holiness. Intense holiness requires restrictions on access and even evokes danger; the High Priest utters no words when performing rituals in the Holy of Holies because this experience of divine presence transcends words. P’s post-exilic redaction likely influenced the interpretation of the Sinai events. If E represents audible revelatory events, what is the nature of ᴏFixed in the Sinai event? Azzan Yadin argues convincingly that ᵃFixed serves to mediate divine presence in Exod 19:19b and 20:18a. In his view, ᴏFixed represents a “hypostatic voice” which reveals divine communication while preserving divine transcendence. Conceiving of ᴏFixed as an inaudible voice perceived through visual phenomena emphasizes God’s ineffable transcendence while expressing internally perceived, authentic revelatory experience.

Scholars and sages debate what the people heard. Could an original manifestation of natural events which accompanied an ineffable revelatory experience lay behind the accounts of the theophany, to which later redactors appended the Decalogue — including priestly editing of the older (E) version? Benjamin D. Sommer explores several options, including the relationship between revelatory experiences and interpretation. Some identify revelatory experiences as lacking didactic content or “words”; Abraham Joshua Heschel and Franz Rosenzweig, respectively, describe the Bible as “commentary” on revelation, or the beginning of its interpretation. Traditional interpretation, reflected in older translations (KJV; JV), view the theophany as divine dictation, taking literally passages depicting God speaking with Moses or to the people: did the ᴏFixed of God answer in “thunder” (NJPS) or in a “voice” (KJV; JV)?

In his Guide of the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides describes biblical references to God “speaking” refer to internal, visionary perceptions. Application of ᵃFixed and ᴏFixed, in his view, are “figurative” ways to express divine-human communication which transcends human speech. Maimonides views prophecy as the “highest” form of divine communication, for example when angels speak to prophets in visions; the “angel” represents “the imaginative faculty that hears God speaking in a prophetic dream.”

In his Guide of the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides describes biblical references to God “speaking” refer to internal, visionary perceptions. Application of ᵃFixed and ᴏFixed, in his view, are “figurative” ways to express divine-human communication which transcends human speech. Maimonides views prophecy as the “highest” form of divine communication, for example when angels speak to prophets in visions; the “angel” represents “the imaginative faculty that hears God speaking in a prophetic dream.”
Deuteronomy 4:11-12 provides a later interpretation of the Sinai (“Horeb” in D and E) theophany. Blazing fire and dark clouds envelope the mountain as the people hear (וַיִּשָּׁמַרְתָּם) the “sound of words (בַּרְכַּח סְמָךְ) from the fire, but see no form (4:12). Might Deuteronomy depict an initial visual revelation accompanied of dark clouds and fire from which לְשׁוֹנַי represents audible phenomena mediating divine revelation which Moses must later interpret human language?!

Following Heschel and Rosenzweig, I view this as interpretation of an originally “wordless” event of internal revelation perceived through visual and audible events in nature. Nahum Sarna refers to these phenomena as “simply powerful events that register the consciousness of the intensified Presence of God at a particular moment in time.”

Exodus 24–25: After ratifying the covenant (vv. 1-8), Moses again ascends Sinai, this time with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and “seventy elders”; they encounter (“they beheld,” נָצַר) God in a mystical vision “beneath his feet” of sapphire tile, “clear as the sky.” Anthropomorphic images of God’s feet blend with mystical images of gemstones and sky to express some type of ineffable encounter transcending the limitations of language. To encounter divine holiness normally evokes fear, yet God leaves them unharmed to “eat and drink” (vv. 10-11). Celebrating a sacramental covenant meal may inspire an internal apprehension or vision of divine presence. At God’s command, Moses again ascends the mountain alone, enters the cloud of glory resting upon the mountain—seen as fire from the distance—and remains a symbolic, revelatory forty days and nights.

Moses receives instructions to build a Tabernacle, an extension of the sanctuary of Sinai in which God will dwell (25:8-9). In the נְשֵׁי of the נֶשֶׁת Moses will receive the נְשֵׁי of God in silence, from the invisible throne amidst the Cherubim over the ark (25:22; Num 7:89). Revelation of the divine voice in dramatic storms evolves into a silent apprehension in the most sacred space. Upon completion, the cloud of Presence fills the sanctuary preventing Moses from entering; cloud and fire will determine the movement of the sanctuary (40:35-38). Schwartz notes Num 7:89, depicting YHWH “speaking” to Moses from the Cherubim over the ark, uses the hitpael, “reflexive” form of the verb רָכֶב, i.e. “speaking to itself,” which may refer to an “internal divine deliberation.”

Maimonides interprets נָצַר as representing the “imaginative faculty” and the “pure intellect.” His insight reflects the greater sanctity associated with the Holy of Holies, where the Cherubs overshadow the kapporet, the invisible divine throne from which God “spoke” to Moses. This implies Moses, standing in silence before the ark in the Holy of Holies, receives internal revelation which he interprets in human speech. Silence is another important medium for internal revelation.

Moses’ experiences of divine revelation begin in mystery (3:1-15), ascend in dramatic, noisy theophany (Exod 19), and end in holy silence. Does this represent Moses’ spiritual growth or a change in YHWH’s communication? External phenomena are silenced; cloud and fire remain as visual symbols but emit no sound.

Elijah on Horeb: Elijah ascends Mt. Horeb during a lone sojourn into the wilderness. Following his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the victorious Elijah is in no mood
Paradox on the Holy Mountain
By Steven Dunn, Ph.D. © 2018

for celebration. He kills the Baal prophets by the Wadi Kishon, evoking Jezebel’s rage. Next Elijah ends a severe drought by again ascending Mt. Carmel, seven times telling his servant to check the skies until a tiny cloud evolves into thick clouds darkening the skies and fructifying the earth with heavy rains. Jezebel sends her threatening message, and Elijah is on the run (18:40–19:3). Overcome by fear, he retreats into the Judean wilderness, coming upon a broom tree and praying for death; an angel (גָּלֶל גָּבֹא), mediating divine presence, appears to provide food, drink and instructions to continue his journey to “the mountain of God, Horeb” (19:4-8; Exod 3:1).

While Moses’ encounters with God at the Burning Bush and on Sinai occur mostly in isolation (except Exod 24:9-11), he is constantly surrounded by crowds of Israelites to whom he must minister and guide. Moses constantly engages people; Elijah spends most of his time alone. According to contemporary cognitive theory, Elijah qualifies as an “introvert,” someone who process information internally, using silence and solitude to center and reenergize. Throughout 1 Kings 18-19, Elijah comes across as severe, committed, engaging his prophetic calling as a vital yet burdensome duty. His encounters with people are limited. He travels in the company of a servant and then in isolation. Elijah and Moses both qualify as “mystics” in our modern sense of the term; Elijah, however, is more like a cloistered monk. Spending so much time alone in his thoughts and discerning God’s internal revelation equips Elijah to be especially attuned to sacred mystery. The revelation in 19:11-13 are preceded and followed by an identical formulaic saying of Elijah proclaiming his zeal for YHWH while lamenting the Israelites’ forsaking the covenant, and that he alone remains of the prophets. Sommer views the saying as evidence for the “literary integrity” of vv. 11-12 (I include v. 13), likely inserted by editors to emphasize the conflict with Baal and parallel the Sinai revelation. While formulaic statements by Elijah indicate editing, I prefer to view vv. 11-13 as original; the revelation outside the cave on the mountain fits well with Elijah’s experience of solitude in his wilderness sojourn, interrupted by angelic revelations as preparation for this climactic event.

The Revelation: YHWH tells him to stand and await his appearance. In succession as strong, violent wind, earthquake, and fire—normal elements of a theophany—occur yet YHWH is in none of them. Paradoxically, it is “a voice of thin silence” (ד"ם להבל ר"מ) which manifests YHWH’s presence, causing Elijah to hide his face (1 Kings 19:11-12). In Moses’ experience on Sinai and Elijah’s on Horeb, the ה"נ mediates YHWH’s presence, yet in seemingly opposite ways—one in deafening, fear-inducing noise; the other in a soft, barely perceptible breeze. Jewish and Christian apophatic mysticism views silence as the highest form of revelatory experience—the closer one ascends to the God, darkness and silence prevail. Elijah’s encounter seems more apophatic while Moses’ experience in Exodus 19 is kataphatic, revelation in audible phenomena. In contrast to Baal’s revelation in storms and earthquakes, YHWH transcends external drama, revealed in utter mystery through the barely perceptible breeze. Sommer suggest this “contests, or at least refines,” the early revelation at Sinai. This raises questions as to sources: do the ancient traditions concerning Elijah used by the Deuteronomic Historians in editing 1 Kings restate an authentic ancient tradition? I view this as an authentic memory associated with Elijah.
Elijah’s encounter with YHWH in קְלֹל דְּמַלְמָה דְּךָ דְּךָ represents a higher level of divine revelation beyond sounds or visual experience. God is unseen and barely perceived in the soft touch of a breeze upon the skin and a whisper in the ear. Sommer connects this to J and P, in Exodus 19 and Exodus 24, translating denamah as “utter silence.” Psalm 107:29-30 similarly combines with the verbs הָדְמָא (“to be silent”) and שָׁמַל (“to cease”), as God intervenes to silence a threatening storm. Job 4:12-16 describes a revelatory experience in a whisper, causing fear, an imperceptible form and קְלֹל דְּמַלְמָה which precedes a “voice.” Psalm 107 and Job 4 provide evidence of a similar, elusive revelatory experience; 1 Kings 19:11-13 seems more direct in identifying a mysterious, awe-inspiring, yet imperceptible revelation. Elijah’s encounter on Horeb represents the great paradox of religious experience: on the one hand, God discernable as a powerful, loving, intimate, and dangerous presence mediated through external events, symbols, sights and sound; on the other hand, God remains ineffable and beyond full human comprehension, encountered through mystical internal ascents into silence.

The aftermath: Elijah’s mystical experience quickly ends as God orders him to continue his ministry, including anointing Elisha as his successor (19:15-16). Elijah’s earthly career ends as he strikes the Jordan with his mantle, parting the waters and crossing over—recalling the Exodus (Exod 14-15) and Joshua leading the Israelites into Canaan (Jos 3)—then ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:8-11). This equates Elijah with Enoch (Genesis 5:24), who “walked with God” and was “taken” (פָנִל; Pss 49:16; 73:24)—biblical images conveying transcendent experiences beyond limitations of time and space. These events inspire later mystical traditions (e.g. Enochic literature) and biblical prophecy of Elijah’s return (Malachi 3:23-24; Mark 6:15; 8:28). Elijah’s mystical ascent to heaven informs later written sources interpreting his encounters and special relationship with God. Elijah’s lone sojourn in the wilderness culminating with his ascent of God’s mountain and encounter in sacred silence sets him apart as a mystic. While not taking the account of his ascent as literal history, I view this as evidence of his reputation as a mystic who had an unparalleled relationship with God.

Conclusion: Mystical traditions emphasizing the ineffable nature of God posit the highest form of revelatory experience transcending words, images, or normative sense experience; the mystic encounters God most powerfully in indescribable experiences of divine silence or even darkness. Taken at face value, the revelation at Sinai recounted in Exodus 19-20 (and parallels in Deuteronomy 4 and 5) present dramatic audible and visual experiences of divine revelation. Yet God remains concealed in a cloud; Moses’ ascent of Sinai in Exodus 24 presents a solitary, perhaps silent encounter in the cloud. Elijah’s experience of God in קְלֹל דְּמַלְמָה דְּךָ דְּךָ on Horeb represents a higher form of revelatory encounter transcending the power of usual theophany images of wind, earthquake and fire. Benjamin Sommer quotes the Hasidic rabbi Naftali Tzvi Horowitz (d. 1827) and his teacher, Menachem Mendel (d. 1815) who interpret the “sound” of revelation at Sinai as only the letter aleph, which begins the word anokhi, “I.” Because the consonant aleph is silent and needs a subsequent vowel sound, it “creates the verbal space for discourse” without words. Israel experiences a “wordless” revelation of God’s powerful, awe-inspiring presence. In this scenario, the Torah represents interpretive commentary on a profound, ineffable experience transcending speech, or any sound and sight. As finite, contingent beings, we experience self-transcendence yet can only communicate it through symbolic language, rituals,
or symbols. Description of Elijah encountering God in a paradoxical voice of thin silence express ineffable encounter with divine presence through the limitations of human language. Sacred space, words, and images create external vehicles to express the internal and ineffable. Contrasting revelatory experiences at Sinai-Horeb ultimately point in the same direction: the undeniable, profound, holy, powerful yet ineffable presence of God internalized and transforming its recipients.

My experiences of wilderness hiking at high elevations, where timberline forests of craggy, scattered, yet beautiful ancient and weathered conifer trees surrounded by awe-inspiring panoramic views of rocky peaks and forested valleys stretching to the horizon, give me context to what Elijah “hears.” Entering a grove of open, weathered trees, filtered by a barely perceptible breeze creating a whisper accompanied by a soft feeling on my skin conveys the sacred presence of an ineffable Creator. Amidst the stark beauty of rocky crags and forests, alone in the paradox of joy and awe, I get a sense of what Elijah experienced on Horeb. God’s essence ultimately transcends our mediatory words, rituals, symbols and dramatic cosmic events. Ascending towards the high point of revelation leads one into silence of ineffable awe and peace.

1 The oft-cited short note by J. Lust, “A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound? Elijah at Horeb: 1 Kings 19:12” VT 25.1 (1975), 110-15, makes a strained argument to read dmm II, “to moan,” and dqq as “crush,” to translate “a roaring and thundering voice” viewing the theophany as a foreboding response to the failure of covenant and prophecy established by Moses. If this was the author’s intention, why use dmm and dqq with qol? The obscure combination of these terms signals a unique revelatory experience, not without fear and terror, but beyond normative theophany language.


3 Benjamin D. Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish Theology” The Journal of Religion 79/3 (1999): 422-451, engages contemporary scholarship and traditional Jewish interpretive traditions to explore the Sinai revelation. He points out several ambiguities in Exodus 19, which modern scholarship attributes to sources, and compares this with creative rabbinc interpretations.


8 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 424, 431.

9 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 428.


13 Schwartz, “‘The LORD Spoke to Moses’” (page 4 of 7).

14 Schwartz, “‘The LORD Spoke to Moses’” (page 6 of 7).


16 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 441-42.

18 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 442.

19 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 443.
