

בס"ד

God of Fire: A Study of Theophany and Pentateuch Fire Imagery

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Introduction

The moment that sparked the original idea for this study happened while I was camping with friends. We arrived on a Friday afternoon and camped through a long weekend. After a Saturday of light hiking inside a New York State park, we lounged around our campsite as the last whispers of light faded from the sky. Then something happened. We all became active, as if on cue, and set about getting our evening together. We had all connected to some moment in the cycle of the day. I do not recall precisely what that moment was. Was it the sunset? The onset of nightfall? Somewhere between the two? I cannot say but I certainly recall the experience. We opened wine, some people smoked, and we lit a fire. I was struck how, while not attempting to do so, we had assembled the accoutrements of Havdalah at precisely the time one would do so ritually. Some dimension of the collective experience in which we were so very aware of nature, had created the same thing that we do through our enactment of Havdalah.

As the evening wore on, I tended the fire. Still curious about the spontaneous manifestation of the ritual, I wondered to myself about other similar connections. I found myself thinking about fire and smoke and ancient people whose lives revolved around their fires. When did sustenance, sacrifice, and spirit transform into fixed ritual? How did fire tenders evolve into priests and priestesses? Stoking the fire, I let my thoughts wander as I stared deep into the flames as I imagined ancient people once did.

A week later, as Shabbat approached, I thought back on the camping trip and prepared to light candles. Certainly as a rabbinic Jew, I am aware that there are celestial benchmarks through the day that determine various practices and prayers. Partially, they are a mechanism for keeping time – pragmatic and elegant in their simplicity. However,

the rituals and practices are not necessarily pragmatic in and of themselves, at least not any more. Lighting candles just before the sun sets doesn't sound special. It sounds practical. If the practice is not to kindle fire on the Sabbath, then one must light it before the sun sets if one hopes to enjoy the light in one's home on a Friday night.

As the coming months unfolded, over and over I saw occurrences of fire in our practice and tradition. The list just continued to grow. Searching for chametz by firelight, burning chametz, the Chanukah Menorah, yahrzeit candles, bonfires for Lag Ba'Omer – all jumped out as contemporary practices that had fire at the core. There were others. Did they too have an earlier stage in their ritual development that was connected to lifeways as I believed lighting candles before Shabbat and making Havdalah after Shabbat did? As the magic eight ball says, "Signs point to yes." The signs started to materialize in my "discovery" of motifs throughout biblical, rabbinic, and mystical literature describing a mythos replete with examples of fire both real and imagined. However, there was no single place to look for them all and it appeared that very little scholarly material was written on the subject.

My original intent was to collect as many appearances of fire in Jewish tradition as I could and to document them with commentary into a paper that I believed would be largely phenomenological and oriented around spiritual practices. However, at every turn, I ran up against a quandary: regardless of the originality of presentation, material consistently pointed to an earlier source which was generally a biblical text. Within the biblical canon, late material consistently referenced (or seemed to reference) an earlier biblical source. Ok. I can take a hint.

How could one study Jewish spiritual practices and not give serious attention to the very text credited with being the foundation of those practices? It therefore seemed prudent to go through the biblical record as methodically as possible looking for appearances of fire and to consider these occurrences alongside the other practices and textual sources of my original investigation. Searching through the material proved challenging in that I could not simply look for the word *עֵשׂ*, fire. For example, the first appearance in Genesis¹ of something aflame does not, in fact, use the word “fire” at all. Were there other words to look for? My searches through the Hebrew text and scholarly translations included words like fire, flame, flaming, lamp, light, lit, burn, and burned, among others. Each iteration provided some helpful material. Further to these searches, I engaged in a review of the text starting with Genesis and worked through the Bible trying to balance the need to be thorough with the need to be expeditious. This endeavor produced a number of other samples of relevant material.

I did not lack for primary biblical sources but scholarly material was sparse. Individual biblical passages might have appeared in larger works of history or exegesis or, indeed, been the subject of their own studies, but no single work spoke to the broad topic save a few short articles, valuable for their references and bibliographies, but not helpful in developing a larger program for ordering the texts. As I tried to bring some of that order myself, I found that I was shifting from the phenomenological to the exegetical.

Good exegesis requires focus so much of the material I originally thought would be relevant fell off the docket due to the volume. The study evolved to concentrate on

¹ See Genesis 3:24.

material found in the Torah, which is precisely the text that provides the surest foundation for the Jewish spiritual practices I had originally intended to study, and is itself described by the tradition as black fire written on white fire. To that end, I see the present endeavor as a necessary first stage in understanding how fire appears both in biblical text and rabbinic tradition of later periods.

In this study, I seek to document and explicate instances of fire or fire imagery in the Pentateuch through the formation of the Tabernacle, and I will try to demonstrate a connection between these instances. I will attempt to show that the appearance of fire in the text is not incidental, that it represents a manifestation of the Divine, and that the textual elements connected to these manifestations are fixed. I believe that particular patterns originate in different source material (i.e. J and E), that the point of convergence is the result of later editorial activity by the P source, and that as material is edited again by the Deuteronomist for whom God's name overtakes God's presence as the central dimension of the Divine dwelling among the people, other forms of manifestation, namely fire, begin to disappear from the text or are transformed. Proving so is well beyond the parameters of the present study and so I will focus on the more documentary endeavors rather than this hypothesis.

With regard to translation, I will generally provide the original Hebrew and the new Jewish Publication Society translation which endeavors not only to be a scholarly work but one that bolsters Jewish practice which, as I said, was to have been the original focus of the study. The New Standard Revised Version was consulted and I have noted where I think the NRSV has made a better choice in its translation. Where needed, I have

offered my own reading in consultation with the above-named translations and various other resources, which are footnoted.

Section I: Creation, Eden, and Emerging into Human History

The biblical account of creation² does not list fire as one of the items created by God nor is it among the few items that exist prior to the first act of creation. It is a noticeable omission, as other ancient myths such as the Greek story of Prometheus or the pseudepigraphical book of Enoch do discuss how fire enters the world. The Bible's account of creation, which begins with light, makes no mention of fire, as such, and does not explain how it came to be. Those items listed by the text comprise elements, major ones, of the natural world itself – oceans, land, animals, celestial bodies, and human beings. Bearing this in mind, then there are three possibilities about what the text might think of fire. It might be completely unimportant. Perhaps it is so obvious, so fundamental to the world that it goes without mention. Another possibility is that it might not be considered a part of the natural world. Like any invention of human beings, it is not part of the creation story and left to the imaginations of people to bring to the world like tools and buildings. A third possibility is that fire remains outside the world.

But just as we have yet to be introduced to fire, at this point in the text, we also have yet to be introduced to the world. Outside the narrative of Creation itself, all the events of the text take place in Eden, which is not at all indicative of the world, as even the ancients had come to know it. Eden is both in and separate from the world. It is a unique and liminal place between primordial God-space and the world of human history. As humanity crosses the threshold from timeless paradise into history, we encounter the first appearance of fire in the text. וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' אֱלֹקִים, מִגֶּן-עֵדֶן-לְעֵבֶד, אֶת-הָאֵדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר לָקַח, מִן-הַיָּם.

² Prior to the first Divine action of speaking “Let there be light” which formally begins the creation of the World, the text of Genesis mentions a number of things.

וַיִּגְרֵשׁ, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּשְׁפֹּן מִקֶּדֶם לְגַן-עֵדֶן אֶת-הַכְּרֻבִים, וְאֵת לַהֵט הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת, לִשְׁמֹר, אֶת-דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים.

“So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove the man out, and stationed east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.”³ The scene is a dramatic one and draws on motifs well known in the ancient world.

Cherubs (הַכְּרֻבִים) are connected to beliefs and practices across the ancient world and appear as guardian figures⁴ and gatekeepers in a variety of traditions. Cherubs and other ancient guardian figures are generally comprised of anatomy from more than one species, one of which is generally human.⁵ This mixture of parts into a single being was understood to be a signifier of status outside the normal human sphere and was identified with royalty and divinity. The particulars of the mixture are not essential to the narrative at this point and consequently, the exact anatomy of the Garden Gate Cherubs is unknowable from the text, most likely because it was obvious to the ancient reader. However, that the being is a mixture of species will be important later as imagery from the garden is recast in the Tabernacle and Temple.⁶ For now, it suffices to say that the familiarity of the ancient reader with this motif helps place fire in context, particularly since the word לַהֵט, rendered here as “fiery,” is extremely unusual.⁷

³ *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 7.

⁴ For a concise etymology of the word כְּרוּב, see Koehler and Baumgartner’s *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 497.

⁵ It is interesting to note the similarities in a few different figures of the ancient world which include biblical descriptions of cherubim, sphinxes, and guardian figures and the recurring components of bull, eagle/wings, lion, and human across ancient cultures.

⁶ Jacob Milgrom addressed the import of the mixed nature of cherubs in a section devoted to mixtures in his study of Leviticus. See *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 236-238.

⁷ This appears to be the only time the root לַהֵט appears in the bible in this form.

In quite a few of the instances where divine messengers or attendants are referred to they are pictured as warriors bearing a sword, which is sometimes flaming. The most obvious case is Gen. 3:24 where Yahweh places the cherubim (the plural probably meaning two) at the east of the Garden of Eden and a flaming, turning sword (*lahat hahereb*) guarding the way of the tree of life. The cherubim and the flaming sword are probably to be recognized as a reflection of the Canaanite fiery messengers... Fire is intimately associated with those divine beings who attend the great gods, and the fire appears to be a sort of weapon.⁸

The phenomenon seems well attested. Delbert Hillers has demonstrated through an exegesis of Amos 7:4 that fire is to be understood as a weapon of the gods. Amos is among the earliest of the prophets and material in this book is likely concurrent with the development of some sections of the Torah in both time and provenance.⁹ Hiller's analysis is helpful in unpacking how fire fits into a larger context of biblical imagery and imagery across the Ancient Near East. He begins by pointing out that some dimensions of Amos 7:4 are unique to the text of Amos, particularly the phrase קורא לרב באש. Similarly, the flaming sword of Genesis 3:4 is equally unattested elsewhere in the canon.

Given his support for a proposed textual emendation and his suggestion of a vertical dittography elsewhere in the text, one wonders if a corrected version could yield להרב באש, an enflamed sword, only one letter different (a possible haplography) from לרב באש. This would certainly seem a possibility given the emendation he supports: “‘And behold, he was summoning a rain of fire, and it consumed the Great Deep.’ The text is thus to be understood as the prophet's vision of the conflict of Yahweh with the primordial monster of the deep, in which his weapon is lightning, or supernatural fire.”¹⁰

⁸ Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 20-21.

⁹ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 397ff.

¹⁰ Delbert R. Hillers, "Amos 7:4 and Ancient Parallels," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26.2 (April 1963): 221-225.

Certainly, this image resonates with the account of creation where God brings light (but not lightning or fire) to conquer the darkness of the primordial deep and if a battle is imagined, a sword would be an appropriate weapon. Regardless of which possibility one chooses to accept, emendation makes the fire a weapon of Yahweh. However, the text has been inherited without these changes and so other elements, for example תהום רבה, may be sufficient to connect the reader's imagination to Genesis's account of creation, which it now seems is framed with imagery of a cosmic battle.

The various "gods" discussed by Hillers are cognate with Yahweh at the beginning of Genesis and thereafter the heavenly attendants of Yahweh, the cherubim, and the fiery weapon becomes identified with the servants of the deity and the enforcement of the Divine will. While introduced to human beings, fire remains connected to God and to Eden, not the world, and remains the purview of supernatural beings.

Section II: Fire and Human Beings

The next two occurrences of fire in the text are connected to human activities. The fire is not supernatural or connected to guardians or gods. Rather, human activity is the creative force and, bowing to the idea that fire may still have been understood as a tool of the gods, fire is, in fact, not mentioned directly by the text.

The first of these episodes occurs immediately after the flood where we are told that upon exiting the ark, Noah brings a sacrifice. וַיִּבֶן נֹחַ מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקַּח מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, וּמִכָּל הָעוֹף הַטְּהוֹר, וַיַּעַל עֹלֹת בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelled the pleasing odor...”¹¹

In the second encounter with humanly created fire, the verb שרף, burns, appears in Genesis 11:3 about making bricks. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ, הֲבָה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים, וְנִשְׂרַפְהָ, לְשִׂרְפָה; וַתְּהִי לָקֶם הַלְבְּנָה, לְאֶבֶן, וְהַחֲמֶר, הָיָה לָקֶם לְחֹמֶר וַיִּשְׂרְפוּ אֹתָם בְּחֵמָה. וַיִּבְנוּ טֹרֶף, וַיִּשְׂרְפוּ אֹתָם בְּחֵמָה. וַיִּבְנוּ טֹרֶף, וַיִּשְׂרְפוּ אֹתָם בְּחֵמָה. “They said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.’—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.”¹² This scene, which sets into motion the building of the Tower of Babel, has nothing to do with fire and in fact, does not technically mention fire. That being said, it would be a specious suggestion that bricks would be burned without fire. It would be similarly peculiar to suggest that Noah’s burnt offering could occur without fire. Nevertheless, the texts do not explicitly mention fire and in both cases, the fire-related action is conducted by human beings, not God, nor a heavenly being of any kind.

¹¹ Genesis 8:20-21a, JPS 15.

¹² Genesis 11:3, JPS 19.

In the case of Noah's offering, we see a number of components that suggest a later connection to the Tabernacle. Among these components are the altar, the concern for what is pure, and that the offering is burnt completely. But this is not the first appearance of a sacrifice in the inherited text. Earlier in Genesis¹³ when Cain and Abel each bring a מנחה, the text lists none of these elements of a sacrifice. There is no altar and there is no smoke and, given that the story ends in bloodshed, certainly no concern for purity.

When taken together, the three episodes form a sort of chiasmus describing human attempts to interact with divinity. Cain and Abel bring sacrifices and both suffer consequences as their offerings bring retribution. One suffers retribution from his brother, the other from God. The text mentions no altar, no smoke, and no fire. Noah brings a sacrifice with all the trappings of a priestly sacrifice and is met with approval. The construction of the tower at the conclusion of the flood narrative hints at these components. The tower itself represents the altar – both are mounds. But rather than burn a sacrifice whose sweet aroma connects them with the Divine, the people instead burn bricks (which are later forbidden to serve as an altar), to climb בשמים themselves.¹⁴ And most striking, there is no offering and the text reports only selfish motives for the endeavor.¹⁵ The key to understanding these passages together is noting that in each case, God does respond. It is not simply the case that if one goes through an incorrect practice in attempting to reach heavenward, one fails with no results. No harm, no foul? No way. If you try to connect but do it wrong, God still shows up and there are dire consequences

¹³ Genesis 4:3ff.

¹⁴ Genesis 11:4.

¹⁵ "To make a name for ourselves."

for errors. It is important to note because so much of where fire enters later texts is connected to sacrifice. Were we to remove the story of Cain and Abel from consideration, we are still left with two episodes in which fire plays a role in how human beings connect with the divine sphere. In each case, perhaps the absence of an explicit mention of fire or a fire related object is due to the fact that the actions involved are conducted by people and not the Divine. However, in each case, God reacts to the human use of fire. In the case of Noah's burnt offering, God takes notice and promises not to destroy the world, whereas the firing of bricks at the tower and the events that follow lead God to confound human languages. In both cases, when human beings make use of fire, God becomes active in the narrative, as though the kindling of fire summoned God.

Section III: Fire in the Patriarchal Narratives

The next appearance of fire in the text, and the first appearance of the word אֵשׁ occurs at the beginning of the patriarchal narrative at the time of God's promise to Abram. וַיְהִי הַשְּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה, וַעֲלֹטָה הָיָה; וְהָיָה תַנּוּר עֵשֶׂן, וְלִפְיֵד אֵשׁ, אֲשֶׁר עָבַר, בֵּין הַגְּזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה. בַּיּוֹם. ... “When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven¹⁶ and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram...”¹⁷ It is not clear from the text whether these implements appear as a function of God's vision to Abraham, a dream caused by Abraham's deep sleep, or that the events should be understood to have actually happened. Regardless, the appearance of the fire, whether real or a vision, is caused by God. Fire is brought by God at the formation of the covenant and becomes linked with the obligations of the covenant for both parties. To drive the point home, the particular implements that appear in the text – the תַּנּוּר עֵשֶׂן, smoking oven, and the לִפְיֵד אֵשׁ, the flaming torch, are evocative of the pillars of smoke and fire that accompany and protect the people through their wandering in the desert at precisely the time that God fulfills the promise made here.

It is further worth noting that the word לִפְיֵד אֵשׁ, here part of the phrase לִפְיֵד אֵשׁ, the flaming torch, is used later at Mount Sinai¹⁸ to mean lightning which, as we have seen, can be understood as a weapon of the deity. Fire does make another appearance in the Abraham narrative during the Akeidah. As Abraham and Isaac begin their journey

¹⁶ NRSV renders this “smoking fire pot” and “flaming torch.”

¹⁷ Genesis 15:17, JPS, 26.

¹⁸ See Exodus 20:15.

ויקח אברהם את-עצי העלה, וישם על-יצחק בנו, ויקח בידו, את-האש ואת-המאכלת; וילכו שניהם, יחדו. ויאמר יצחק אל-אברהם אביו, ויאמר אבי, הניני בני; ויאמר, הנה האש והעצים, לעלה. ויאיה השוה, לעלה. “Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he answered ‘Yes, my son.’ And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”¹⁹ The JPS translation here renders “האש” as “firestone.” I prefer the NRSV’s translation of “the fire.” I would like to suggest that this read is the more correct one and that the text may in fact mean a particular fire.

Immediately prior to Abraham’s receiving the smoking oven and the flaming torch, the text describes a sacrifice of sorts in which five animals are requested by God and cut up by Abraham. We are told that the animal parts are laid out and birds of prey descend on the flesh. While Abraham has clearly done what God has asked, the descent of the birds suggests that something is wrong or perhaps missing and Abraham drives the birds away. Directly after this episode, God appears to Abraham in some kind of dream²⁰ and makes the two implements of fire appear – the smoking oven and the flaming torch. Abraham’s imperfect sacrifice is made whole through the addition of God’s fire, which the text says moved between the cut pieces of the animals. In so doing, the text connects three elements: sacrifice, covenant, and fire. So when God again asks Abraham for a sacrifice – this time his son – it would be reasonable to assume that “the fire” Abraham

¹⁹ Genesis 22:6-7. JPS 39.

²⁰ The text does not say dream. A “deep sleep” and a “dark dread” (per JPS) fall on Abraham. God then speaks.

takes to fulfill God's will is the very same fire that God already introduced to Abraham and was used to complete the sacrifice at the beginning of the covenant.

As the narrative continues, Abraham and Isaac ascend with the fire to the place that was chosen by God. There is no mention of the smoke at this time and in preparation of the sacrifice, a מזבח, altar, is prepared. As Abraham is about to slaughter Isaac he is stopped. “Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven...”²¹ The presence of the angel in this episode is significant, not just for the narrative. In the presence of “the fire” which we have shown originated with the Divine, the appearance of an angel is reminiscent of the cherubs and the flaming sword of Eden. There, we did not see an implement of smoke. Later, when we learn of Noah's sacrifice, again, on a מזבח, there is no angel but God smells the ריח הניחח, which, it seems very reasonable to say, is because the smoke of the sacrifice has risen to the abode of the Divine. And now, as Abraham goes up to sacrifice Isaac he brings, “the fire” and in the absence of the תנור עשן an angel appears, seemingly in its place.

Abraham takes one additional implement with him. After saddling Isaac with the wood necessary to make a burnt offering, Abraham takes “the fire” and המאכלה, “the knife.”²² Until this point, there has been no specific mention of a knife in the narrative and so the use of the definite article is perplexing though one could reasonably ignore it and read something like “the knife he would need.” Nevertheless, that Abraham takes some kind of fire with some kind of blade and is confronted by an angel is striking when

²¹ Genesis 22:11, JPS 40.

²² Genesis 22:6, JPS 39.

Divine mind, and the three men take action consistent with that narration. When we learn that God intends to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah for reasons about which the text does not elaborate, we see that וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֵמָה, וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים, “The men went on from there to Sodom”²⁵ It is only later, at the beginning of chapter 19 that the text makes mention of מַלְאָכִים. וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סְדֵמָה. מַלְאָכִים. “The two angels arrived in Sodom.”²⁶

Already, we have a number of peculiarities. First, why is God narrating in the first person but action is being taken by three men? Why are there three men noted in chapter eighteen but only two arrive in Sodom in chapter nineteen? Why are they designated as מַלְאָכִים as opposed to אֲנָשִׁים? Dismissing outright the suggestion of a careless author or editor,²⁷ we have the conflation of these elements into a single motif that conforms to the larger pattern. Furthermore, it opens up the possibility that elements of the pattern may, at a later point, be realized in alternative ways. That is to say, that the text calls the three individuals men but later calls the two who went to Sodom angels is not a problem in that what matters is that in both cases, they were acting according to what God said. Furthermore, the text opens up the possibility that while a supernatural being has stood in as an attendant of the Divine until now, perhaps, there are occasions where a human being may do the same. The decrease from three to two is addressed by a longstanding

²⁵ Genesis 18:22, JPS 31.

²⁶ Genesis 19:1, JPS 32.

²⁷ In his book, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, Richard Elliot Friedman designates the entire section as coming from J source material which suggests a single editorial choice. See Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2003) 18-19.

He annihilated those cities and the entire plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground.”³¹

The only other appearance of the word גפרית, brimstone or sulfur, in the Torah is in Deuteronomy where the text is quite clearly referring back to Genesis.³² There however, the text does not use the phrase גפרית ואש. There, fire is replaced by מלח, salt. There are five further occurrences of the word גפרית in the rest of the Hebrew Bible in four books.³³ In Isaiah and in Job brimstone is not paired with anything else. In Psalms brimstone is paired with fire but in reverse order than we saw in Genesis (i.e. אש וגפרית). In Ezekiel it appears together with fire and hail. In each case, the brimstone is a weapon of God or a punishment for bad behavior. It is an unusual word connected solely to the retribution of an angry God.

Here again we see further connections to Eden. First, the brimstone and fire which is rained down from Heaven could stand in for the flaming sword. The cherubs at the gate of Eden are here replaced by the two *malachim*. The flaming sword is placed by God at Eden and the fire is rained מֵאֵת ה' onto Sodom and Gomorrah. There are two further connections. First, the above quoted passage begins by saying that הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא עַל-הָאָרֶץ, the sun rose upon the earth. The sun here is evocative of the light of creation and, perhaps, may itself be a manifestation of the Divine fire. That being said, if it is, it is not consistent with the expression of God through fire as we have seen it and more likely, the sun is associated with light. This seems particularly so as the passage ends by noting that not only were all the people and the city destroyed but so too was the וְצִמָּח הָאֲדָמָה, the

³¹ Genesis 19:23-25, JPS 34.

³² See Deuteronomy 29:22.

³³ See Isaiah 30:33, 34:9, Ezekiel 38:22, Psalms 11:6, and Job 18:15.

vegetation of the ground. The word קמץ, sprouted, was used earlier in Genesis to describe the lack of vegetation after the six days of creation but before the Genesis 2 account of human creation “when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil.”³⁴ The mention of a kind of rain in both places is a further connection. In Genesis 2, a lack of normal rain from God prevents the sprouting. In Genesis 19, an abnormal rain from God destroys the sprouting. Just as Adam and Eve are separated from the garden and all that grew there after they sinned and were punished with mortality, so too is the vegetation of Sodom and Gomorrah cut off as the sinners of the cities are themselves destroyed. In each case, God wields a fiery weapon in the presence of angels to finalize the punishment.

³⁴ Genesis2:5, JPS 3.

Section IV: Local Shrines

The patriarchal narratives and, indeed, the rest of Genesis, draw to a close without any further manifestation of God through fire as we have explored it. There are a number of occasions where the text tells us that one person or another set up an altar. Early on we saw that human activities could be efficacious if performed according to a particular paradigm, one that was echoed by the Divine as in the case of Noah's sacrifice but none of those elements recombine as we have seen, at least not in any obvious way, until the book of Exodus. Despite the building of a number of altars along the way, we do not see a manifestation of God, with perhaps one exception, until the book of Exodus.

What then, do we make of the altars which, in so many other places, are connected to the appearance of God through burnt offering? The answer may simply be that an altar, even when there is animal sacrifice, may not be connected to a larger system of worship. In his study of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom points out that a particular law "prohibits to Israel all common, nonsacrificial slaughter and, instead, demands that the meat for the table initiate as a sacrifice."³⁵ He adds "The word for sacrifice, *zabah*, denotes a well-being offering, the meat of which is eaten by the offerer—another indication that the subject of this law is the proper procedure for providing meat... The plain meaning of this text is that the ban on nonsacrificial slaughter is to be permanent. It is the pragmatic consequences of H's assumption that there always will be multiple sanctuaries, one in easy access of every Israelite."³⁶ It is reasonable, then, to wonder how far beyond the boundaries of Leviticus we find this prohibition in practice. As Milgrom

³⁵ Milgrom, 189.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

points out, the section of Leviticus which prohibits secular slaughter also elaborates on the prohibition against eating blood which has older roots, namely the Noachide laws (see Genesis 9:4)³⁷ so we may be dealing with an older tradition, one that figures into how people ate meat.

A מזבה might also be commemorative of an appearance of the Divine as when “The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘I will assign this land to your offspring.’ And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.”³⁸ In none of the remaining occurrences of an altar in Genesis do we see sacrifice, fire, or any of the other elements we would expect and if there is an appearance of the Divine, the altar is only commemorative of something. Furthermore, in the absence of any clear sense of sacrifice including and especially a burnt offering of any kind, we may dismiss from further consideration any such altar because they do not appear to be involved in any human attempt to initiate or maintain a manifestation of God’s presence through fire. They are similar enough to comprise a pattern unto themselves and are therefore outside the parameters of this study. They seem to be indicative of a larger shift that occurs from the end of the patriarchal narratives to the end of Genesis. God appears less and less, only to specific people, and largely in dreams. This is a move from a very visible and outward

³⁷ Ibid. 189.

³⁸ Genesis 12:7-8, JPS 21. See also Genesis 13:4, 13:18, 26:24-25, 33:20, 35:1-7. Each of these verses makes mention of an altar but no sacrifice is mentioned and on the occasions that God appears, the altar appears to be commemorative. This may be connected to the practice of erecting a commemorative מצבה elsewhere as, for example, in Genesis 28:18 where Jacob commemorates his dream with a מצבה.

appearance of God towards an inward manifestation requiring discernment and interpretation.

Section V: The Burning Bush and the Exodus from Egypt

The next key appearance of God is at the beginning of Exodus. The episode of the burning bush rejuvenates the presence of the Divine in the text by making use of our motif with gusto.

ומִשֶׁה, הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת-צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוֹ-כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן; וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר, וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הַר הָאֱלֹקִים הַרְבֵּה. וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו, בְּלַבַּת-אֵשׁ-מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה; וַיֵּרָא, וַהֲגִה הַסִּינָה בְּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ, וַהֲסִינָה, אֵינֶנּוּ אֶפֶל. וַיֹּאמֶר מִשֶׁה-אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וְאָרְאֶה, אֶת-הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה: מִדּוּעַ, לֹא-יִבָּעַר הַסִּינָה. וַיֵּרָא ה', כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת; וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹקִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה, וַיֹּאמֶר מִשֶׁה-וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִי.

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.”³⁹

First, it is significant that this theophany takes place on a mountain. It has been observed that different types of deities are worshipped through different modalities. Of particular note is that celestial deities are frequently identified with mounds and with mountains and their worship takes place on raised altars. This is in contrast to chthonic deities which are worshipped in valleys and low places and with pits and other similarly unmounded accoutrements.⁴⁰ A significant number of Divine manifestations and appellatives have been very clear that Yahweh is a celestial deity. God’s existence in שמים, sky/heaven, the name א-ל עליון, God Most High, and א-ל שדי from the Akkadian name of the mountain deity⁴¹ are all examples. We may contrast this with Molek worship which is identified with access to ancestors in Sheol, the Biblical underworld, and took

³⁹ Exodus 3:1-4, JPS 116.

⁴⁰ Milgrom.

⁴¹ Kohler and Baumgartner, 1420-1422.

place in the Valley of ben Hinnom.⁴² So, the mountain itself really is a key piece of the paradigm. We saw a hint of this very early on in Genesis at the Tower of Babel which as we have noted was an attempt to reach the deity but without observing the appropriate formula. The episode is also forward-looking in that the theophany here is a prelude to theophany at Sinai. In fact, it has been suggested that the use of the bush here, *הַסֵּבֶה*, is connected to *סִינַי*, Sinai, and there is a longstanding tradition identifying Horeb with Sinai.⁴³ The fact that the name Horeb is based on the the root *הִרַב*, the same root as sword, cannot be ignored.

Second, as we have seen elsewhere, the deity is attended by an angel. In fact, it seems that the angel is the one that appears to Moses through the flames. Particularly given our earlier experience with angels in the patriarchal narratives and the confusion between them and the Divine vis-à-vis who is doing what, we may be observing something similar here. Sarna says that the angel “has no role in the entire theophany; it is the fire that attracts Moses’ attention, and it is always God Himself who speaks. Most likely the angel is mentioned only to avoid what would be a gross anthropomorphism of localizing God in a bush.”⁴⁴ This seems to me to miss a key point, namely, that elsewhere when God’s manifestation is one of fire, one or more angels are present to attend the Divine. Furthermore, elsewhere the text has no trouble at all locating God in a fixed space but Sarna’s observation that it is God who speaks directly is important, as so much

⁴² Milgrom, 246ff.

⁴³ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 14.

⁴⁴ Loc. cit.

of the Exodus narrative emphasizes God's direct role in liberating the Israelites from Egypt.

A number of elements suggest a connection to Eden, not the least of which is the bush itself. The element of vegetation is certainly a motif in the story of Eden and appeared at the Akeidah via the wood carried by Isaac. At Sodom and Gomorrah, God destroyed everything down to the vegetation. Here, at the burning bush, God is changing the course of history and the symbolism of the plant is changed as well. Whereas, the Garden of Eden was placed in the East, Moses finds God while going to the West.⁴⁵ Instead of being destroyed by God's fiery wrath, the bush burns but is not consumed. Standing, as it does, at the edge of the chaos of the wilderness, the burning bush is a creation story of sorts for it is here that the fulfillment of God's promise to the ancestors begins. And lest we think that we've misunderstood the event, Moses is told to say the following in the court of the king of Egypt וַאֲמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו ה' אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִיִּים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ “and you shall say to him, ‘the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested himself to us.’”⁴⁶ We are to understand the direct involvement of the Divine which is not necessarily obvious given the appearance of an angel. Nevertheless, the direct involvement of God is a theme through the Exodus and here the point is to make it very clear that the burning bush is a manifestation of the Divine.

Once in Pharaoh's court Moses performs the signs as God instructed but Pharaoh is unmoved. וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם, בְּלִטְיָהֶם; וַיִּחַזְק לֵב-פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה'. “But

⁴⁵ See Sarna on אהרן המדבר, 14.

⁴⁶ Exodus 3:18, JPS 117. NRSV renders נקרה “has met with us.” When these words are repeated later in Exodus 5:3, נקרא is instead spelled נקרא. JPS does not change its translation and maintains “manifested.” NRSV changes “has met with us” to “has revealed himself to us.”

when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the Lord had spoken.”⁴⁷ Pharaoh was considered a deity and it is not surprising that as a deity we would find a connection with our motif. Certainly we expect royalty to have attendants but what is surprising is that the magicians perform the same wonders בְּלִטְיָהֶם, which JPS translates as “with their spells. NRSV renders this as “by their secret arts.” Other translations might include “mysteries” or “enchantments.”⁴⁸ But this word, בְּלִטְיָהֶם, is cognate with לֶהֱטֵא, the same word used to describe the flaming sword of Eden. Structurally, the word indicates a parallel in that one who attends a deity makes use of a לֶהֱטֵא, whatever it may mean. Given that at Eden a sword is specifically mentioned and that Moses and Aaron make use of their staffs in the performance of the signs and wonders, the magicians of Pharaoh's court may be making use of some kind of object which could be understood to be enchanted although the particular instruments may not be aflame. The word is used twice more during the plague narratives.⁴⁹

Another connection to Eden and to Creation is that the first of the “signs and wonders” performed by Moses is to transform his rod into a snake. Exodus 4:3 calls the animal a נָחַשׁ which is, of course, the name for the animal in the Garden of Eden. Further on in the Exodus narrative, the animal is called a תַּנִּין which is rendered by JPS as “serpent” and by NRSV simply as “snake.”⁵⁰ A more likely suggestion is “crocodile,”⁵¹ particularly if we are to understand that a contest of gods is underway since the Egyptian deity Sobek, represented as a crocodile, was connected to the Pharaoh. The same word is

⁴⁷ Exodus 7:22, JPS 126.

⁴⁸ Koehler and Baumgartner, 521.

⁴⁹ See Exodus 8:3 and 8:14.

⁵⁰ See Exodus 7:10-12.

⁵¹ Koehler and Baumgartner, 1764.

used during the Creation narrative to describe the “great sea monsters.”⁵² By further connecting the events in Pharaoh’s court to the Garden of Eden and to the first chapter of Genesis, the text establishes a framework for understanding the coming narrative of the ten plagues. Just as God presided over Creation first-hand, God is again present and ordering events. To wit, each one of the plagues has a connection to some element of the creation narrative.⁵³

Of particular note is the sixth plague, that of ברד. This is a plague unlike the others. Of it, God says כי בפעם הזאת, אני שלח את-כל-מגפתי אל-לבך, ובעבדך, ובעמך-בעבור תדע, “For this time I will send all my plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.”⁵⁴ Whereas every other plague had been of a general sort, this one is personal. God strikes out אל לבך, translated here as “upon your person.” The NRSV renders this as “upon you yourself.” Yahweh, God of the Hebrews⁵⁵ strikes out at the god King Pharaoh, theophanized as a crocodile and identified with fertility and fecundity through the waters of the Nile. ויט משה את-מטהו, על-השמים, וה' נתן קולת וברד, ותהלה אש ארצה; וימטר ה' ברד, על-ארץ מצרים. “So Moses held out his rod toward the sky, and the Lord sent Thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as the Lord rained down hail upon the land of Egypt. ויהי ברד-ואש, מתלקחת בתוך הברד: כבד מאד-אשר לא-היה כמהו בכל-ארץ מצרים, מאז היתה. לגוי. “So Moses held out his rod toward the sky, and the Lord sent Thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as the Lord rained down hail upon the land of Egypt.

⁵² Genesis 1:21, JPS 2. NRSV also translates this as “great sea monsters.”

⁵³ Ziony Zevit, “Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues” in *Bible Review*, June 1990.

⁵⁴ Exodus 9:14, JPS 130.

⁵⁵ Exodus 9:13

The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail—such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.”⁵⁶ God strikes the Pharaoh, a god of the Nile, as God once struck the god of chaos that was the primordial sea with a weapon of light, later symbolized by fire in the hands of God’s servants. Further to this is the connection of the plagues to the creation narrative. On this particular plague Zevit writes:

The...hail and locusts involve the destruction of another part of creation, primarily vegetation. What was not destroyed by the hail was consumed by the locusts. When these two plagues had run their course, Egypt could be contrasted to the way the world appeared after the third day of creation: “The land brought forth vegetation: seed bearing fruit with seed in it” (Genesis 1:12). By contrast, in Exodus 10:15 we are told that “nothing green was left of tree or grass of the field in all the land of Egypt.”⁵⁷

This rain of emblazoned hail is also reminiscent of the fire and brimstone that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah. Not only is it God’s fire rained down from above, we see also the destruction of vegetation which we noted at the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:24-25. On their departure from Eden, Adam and Eve are cut off from the garden and its trees. However, an important new possibility has entered the narrative. At this point in Exodus, we do not see an angel or a cosmic being, though we surely will again. Here, the Divine servant wielding a staff, not a sword, is Moses. So the earlier possibility of a human being attending the Divine is realized.

⁵⁶ Exodus 9:23-24, JPS 130-131.

⁵⁷ Zevit.

Section VI: Crossing the Sea

After God struck Pharaoh and Egypt with three more plagues, Pharaoh released the Israelites from bondage and almost immediately we are introduced to a new Divine manifestation that accompanies the Israelites on their journey. וְהָיָה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד וְלַיְלָה לְנֹחָתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ, וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ, לְהַאֲרִיר לָהֶם-לְלֶכֶת, יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. לֹא-נִמְיֵשׁ עַמּוּד הָעָנָן, יוֹמָם, וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ, מִן-הָעֶרְבַּיִם לְפָנֵיהֶם לַיְלָה-לְפָנֵי, הָעָם “The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”⁵⁸ On the heels of the plagues which, as noted, paralleled elements of the creation narrative, we encounter the two pillars as the Israelites enter the wilderness. The verb used to describe God’s accompaniment is הֵלַךְ, the root of which is the same used to describe God’s “moving about”⁵⁹ in the Garden of Eden. In both cases the verb suggests some kind of dynamic localized presence. Absent, however, is an obvious reference to vegetation, in particular, the destruction of vegetation which earlier symbolized the separation from Eden. Here, the absence of such a reference coupled with God’s dynamic localized presence, suggests that the wilderness should be understood as a new Eden. There is no weapon and consequently, no attendant to wield it. Or is there?

Immediately after this peaceful appearance of the two pillars Pharaoh and the Egyptians have a change of heart and pursue the Israelites. וַיִּסַּע מִלֶּאדָּה הָאֱלֹקִים, הַהֵלֵךְ לִפְנֵי מַחְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיִּלְךָ, מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם; וַיִּסַּע עַמּוּד הָעָנָן, מִפְּנֵיהֶם, וַיַּעֲמֵד, מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם. וַיִּבֹא בֵּין מַחְנֵה מִצְרַיִם, וּבֵין מַחְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיִּהְיֶה הָעָנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ, וַיִּצָּר אֶת-הַלְיָלָה; וְלֹא-קָרַב זֶה אֶל-זֶה, כָּל-הַלְיָלָה “The angel of God, who

⁵⁸ Exodus 13:21-22, JPS 141.

⁵⁹ Genesis 3:8, JPS 5. NRSV renders מתהלך as “walking.”

had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and followed behind them and took up a place behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them.”⁶⁰ The mood shifts. The Israelites are being pursued by an army. This is now a battle and all of the sudden, an angel appears. Or more precisely, we are made aware of an angel that seems to have already been present despite not having previously been mentioned. Earlier in Exodus (13:21-22) we were told that it was God who went ahead of the Israelites but now the text identifies an angel. This is not necessarily surprising as we have seen the text conflate God and God’s messengers as in the case of the three who visit Abraham. However, whereas two pillars were mentioned previously – one smoke, and one fire – these later verses connect the motion of the angel to the pillar of smoke which, here too, is described with the same verb we saw previously – הלך. The text does say of the pillar אֶת-הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּצְאֵר, that it “cast a spell upon the night”⁶¹ or perhaps “lit up the night” (NRSV). This first suggestion is intriguing because while a very different root, it suggests a meaning much closer to להט which we earlier saw had connections both to flame and enchantment. Here, the root is unclear. One suggestion of אור connects ויאר to illumination. The other possibility is that the root is ארר so as to suggest a curse which we might consider a form of enchantment.⁶² While a different root altogether, the constellation of possible meanings is quite similar to להט and one wonders if the ambiguity is intended.

While the pillar of cloud stands in the face of Pharaoh’s horde, who earlier represented both Egyptian divinity through the personification of the Nile as well as

⁶⁰ Exodus 14:19-20, JPS 142.

⁶¹ Exodus 14:20, JPS 142.

⁶² See JPS, note D on page 142 or Koehler and Baumgartner ארר on page 91.

primordial chaos of the watery deep, Moses stands at the edge of the sea, arms outstretched with his staff in hand, a substitute for the enchanted weapon of God. The pillar of fire goes surprisingly unmentioned, though it is not necessarily absent. Earlier, we saw the two pillars identified with God but later the pillar of smoke became connected to an angel. Wherever the pillar of fire is positioned, it remains a manifestation of God who, using a wind,⁶³ reminiscent of *אֵלֶּיךָ אֵלֹהִים מִרְחֹק עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם* “a wind from God sweeping over the water,”⁶⁴ divides the sea: *וַיִּשָׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לְחָרְבָה; וַיִּבְקַעוּ, הַמַּיִם* “and turned the sea into dry ground”⁶⁵ much as God brings forth dry ground in Genesis 1:9-10. Even the word for ground here, *חַרְבָה*, is suggestive of a sword, *חַרְב*. Whereas, the word for dry ground used in the creation narrative is *הַיַּבֶּשֶׁה*. One wonders if a possible read, albeit poetic, of *וַיִּשָׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לְחָרְבָה* might yield something akin to “And God put the sea to the sword.” Here, God manifests as the pillar of fire against the sea, or absent this theophany, uses Moses in place of God’s fiery sword, and reenacts Creation and the triumph over chaotic waters, in preparation to vanquish the armies of the Nile god Pharaoh.

With one half of the battle completed and the sea parted, we read *וַיְהִי, בְּאַשְׁמֹרֶת* “At the morning watch, the Lord looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.”⁶⁶ Here, it is ambiguous as to whether the two pillars are in fact still two pillars as the text describes God’s having looked down *אֵשׁ וָעָנָן*, the word for pillar in the singular but naming both the fire and the cloud. Nevertheless,

⁶³ Exodus 14:22 *בְּרוּחַ קָדִים*.

⁶⁴ Genesis 1:2, JPS 1.

⁶⁵ Exodus 20:21, JPS 143.

⁶⁶ Exodus 14:24, JPS 143.

whether it is both pillars or one pillar now described with two attributes, the final vanquish of the Egyptian army follows immediately. Yahweh triumphs over all other deities and asserts mastery over chaos and all of creation with a single blow struck from atop a pillar of smoke and fire.

Section VII: The *Kavod*

A short time after crossing the sea, we are introduced to a new manifestation of God. Having second thoughts about leaving Egypt, the Israelites begin “murmuring.” Wanting for food and water, God promises Moses that food will be provided. Moses and Aaron further promise that וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת-כְּבוֹד ה' .⁶⁷ The children of Israel will see the *Kavod* of Yahweh. JPS understands this to be a manifestation of the Divine and so translates “you shall see the Presence of the Lord.”⁶⁸ NRSV renders this phrase “you shall see the glory of the Lord” which is a more general read indicating an understanding that all the events glorify God. However, the rendering of Presence, or some sort of visible display, seems the more likely meaning particularly in light of later passages. Three verses later we read that the promise was fulfilled. וַיִּהְיֶה כְבוֹד ה', נִרְאָה בְּעָנָן “and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of the Lord.”⁶⁹ Whatever it may mean, the manifestation is observable. Koehler and Baumgartner note that the construct ה' כבוד is “often connected with manifestations of light (orig. a weather god, or the god of a volcano?).”⁷⁰ Of present interest, is that the *Kavod* appears in a cloud. What is not clear from the text is whether we are to assume that the cloud mentioned is the cloud pillar with which we are already familiar and that has appeared paired with fire, or if the cloud is not a specific cloud. Regardless, this manifestation of God is accompanied, here by a cloud, and is either the fire manifestation we have already seen or some new kind of appearance. The cloud is again repeated in Exodus 19:9 where God promises to appear בְּעַב הָעָנָן, “in a thick

⁶⁷ Exodus 16:7.

⁶⁸ JPS, 147.

⁶⁹ Exodus 16:10, JPS 147-148.

⁷⁰ Koehler and Baumgartner, 457.

cloud.”⁷¹ A few verses later, this promise is seemingly fulfilled as we read that in the midst of other natural phenomena, וַעֲנַן כְּבֹד עַל-הַהָר, “a dense cloud upon the mountain.”⁷² NRSV renders this “a thick cloud on the mountain.” While either translation might suffice in the plain sense, each loses sight of the fact that the adjective, כבד, which might also mean “heavy” is the same root as *Kavod*, the particular visible manifestation of God previously mentioned. While the grammar of the text as it is currently pointed does not permit it, alternative vowels might allow for a reading like “a cloud of *Kavod*” or “a *Kavod* cloud.” Regardless, the allusion to the *Kavod*, the visual manifestation of God seems clearly intended since the cloud is itself an observable phenomenon. It is also worth noting that the plague of hail, ברד, is described as כְּבֹד מְאֹד “very heavy.”⁷³

⁷¹ JPS, 154.

⁷² Exodus 19:16, JPS 154.

⁷³ Exodus 9:24, JPS 131.

Section VIII: Mount Sinai

The next major appearance of God in the text, theophany par excellence, is revelation at Mount Sinai and indeed, this particular moment represents an apex in the narrative structure of the Torah as a whole and has implications specifically for understanding fire. One suggestion for the overarching organization of the Torah is that of a Hexateuch (the five books of the Torah plus Joshua) comprised of a grand chiasmus and in it the revelation at Sinai represents the central, pivotal point.⁷⁴ On this structure Milgrom notes that “as in all introverted structures, the center (X) is crucial.”⁷⁵ This is important because the central narrative element of the Torah, the event that will define the relationship of the people with the Deity, one that is so often defined by text and law, is one in which God appears in a manifestation of fire. והר סיני, עשן כלו, מפני אשר ירד עליו. “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.”⁷⁶ That the revelation takes place on a mountain is not surprising. Genesis 22 notes the binding of Isaac to be in the mountains and Exodus 3 places the episode of the burning bush on Mount Horeb. God descends in a fire, while smoke rises. The smoke rising is reminiscent of the smoke of Noah’s sacrifice in Genesis 8 which occurs after the ark lands in the Mountains of Ararat. The smoke resembles that of a kiln which, in the ancient world, was shaped like a mountain. The kiln further

⁷⁴ Jacob Milgrom, Introduction to the *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, (New York, The Jewish Publication Society: 1990) xvii-xviii. Milgrom credits the diagram shown “courtesy of Newirth” but does not cite a more specific source.

⁷⁵ Loc. cit.

⁷⁶ Exodus 19:18, JPS 154-155.

reminds us of the תנור עֶשֶׂן, smoking oven, from Genesis 15. Here, at Sinai, we read that
וַיִּרְאוּ הָעָם וַיִּנְגְּעוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֹק.

“All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the
mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.”⁷⁷

Here, “lightening” is a translation for הַלְפִידִם, the same word used by Genesis 15 to
describe the לֶפֶיד אֵשׁ translated above as “flaming torch.” The name of the mountain too,
as we noted above, may be significant in that סִינַי may be connected to סִנְיָה, “bush.” As
further noted above, there is an identification of Mount Sinai with Mount Horeb which
has the same root – חרב – as the word for sword and the word describing dry land, חֲרֵבָה,
in the midst of the parted sea.

In the previous chapter, God promised to appear in a thick cloud עָנָן, (Ex. 19:9)
and that promise is fulfilled vis-à-vis the עָנָן כָּבֵד (Ex. 19:16) but here the word used is עֶשֶׂן,
smoke. By conflating these two visual materializations, there is a subtle shift that will
define the relationship between God and the people post-Sinai. However, before
exploring that, it must be noted that the above proposed reading of both the crossing of
the sea and the manifestation of God at Mount Sinai, appears to draw elements from
every, yes, every prior text herein listed.

Connected to the shift in the relationship between God and the people and parallel
to the smoke rising to meet God descending on the Mountain we read וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל-הַר סִינַי,
אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר; וַיִּקְרָא ה' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר, וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, רֵד הָעֵד בְּעַם: פֶּן-יִהְיֶה רְסוּס אֶל-ה'
רֵב. לְרֹאשׁוֹת, וַיִּפֹּל מִמֶּנּוּ רֵב. “The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain,
and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. The Lord said

⁷⁷ Exodus, 20:15, JPS 156.

to Moses, ‘Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish.’⁷⁸ Instead of the smoke rising to meet God, Moses does. Smoke, as we just saw, has replaced the cloud, the manifestation that not only appears on the mountain, but also accompanies the pillar of fire. Here Moses stands in for both. By showing Moses as the stand-in for the Divine attendant, first at the sea and now on the mountain where he is a substitute for the cloud that transmutes into smoke, the entity that shrouds the fiery manifestation of God, the text marks a major shift. Not only may a person attend the Divine, human beings can create the conditions in which God will manifest.

While clouds are outside the realm of human endeavor, smoke, particularly the smoke of a sacrifice, can be created by people. Doing so will form the basis of how the relationship that is forged at Sinai will be lived out by the people, namely by continually recreating the conditions of the Sinai theophany, to which we are about to be introduced, in the Tabernacle.

The text continues with a few preliminaries to prepare for the revelation of the law which begins with the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments formalize the new relationship between God and the people. Immediately after the Ten Commandments are given, the text continues with a further description of the visual dimension of the appearance of God and adds that Moses drew close to *הָעֲרֵפֶל*.⁷⁹ The precise meaning is not clear but it is something further shielding the Deity from view. JPS renders this word “thick cloud.” NRSV suggests “thick darkness.” Friedman translates this as “nimbus”⁸⁰ a worthy suggestion not only for its meteorological meaning but also for its usage as a halo.

⁷⁸ Exodus, 19:20-21, JPS 155.

⁷⁹ Exodus 20:18, JPS 156.

⁸⁰ Friedman, 154.

The word **הַרְקָה**, rendered here as “your tool” is now a familiar element in the text. The NRSV renders this as “chisel.” Again, Friedman offers us an illuminating alternative: “And if you make an altar of stones for me, you shall not make them cut. When you have elevated your sword over it, then you have desecrated it.”⁸⁴ Friedman’s use of “sword” here feels like a correct read and **הַנִּפְתָּה**, from the root **נ.ו.ף**, can mean to wave, as in **תְּנוּפָה**, a wave offering. Remembering the sword motif in earlier passages, the text strikes this element going forward, thus signaling another shift. Whereas the sword began as a symbolic element standing in for the Deity alongside attendants who were present in the text, the Deity is now the one who is present and the attendants have become, or are about to become, symbolic. We see this also in the shift from cloud to smoke. That this reversal takes place at the precise moment of the chiasmic apex of the Torah, is paramount as other elements of the Sinai theophany will define the cult practice.

Before looking at that practice, there is one final description of the Divine on the mountain to examine. Exodus 24 begins with a description of Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Abihu, and a group of 70 elders approaching Yahweh who behold the Divine, seemingly directly. **וַיִּרְאוּ, אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו, כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנֵת הַסַּפִּיר, וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם, לְטָהָר.** “And they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.”⁸⁵ In her study on Leviticus, Mary Douglas writes about this particular scene. “Assuming that the mountain is a projection of the Tabernacle, we can see that if the tabernacle were up-ended to be in the same vertical position as the mountain, the floor of the top compartment becomes the ceiling of the middle

⁸⁴ Friedman, 154.

⁸⁵ Exodus 24:10, JPS 165.

compartment, and the elders are looking up at the floor of God’s abode, through the clear glassy blue paving. Thus they can behold him, without being endangered by his laying hands on them, safely separated by the transparent ceiling/floor.”⁸⁶

The text does not elaborate with a further description of God but this sapphire shield and the possibility of connection with the Tabernacle is important. Douglas offers the following table⁸⁷ to further illustrate the parallel.⁸⁸

<i>Mt Sinai</i>	<i>Tabernacle</i>
Summit or head of the mountain, smoke, like cloud (Ex 19: 18); God came down to top, access for Moses only (Exod 19: 20-2).	Holy of holies, cherubim, ark and testimony of covenant, clouds of incense.
<i>Perimeter</i> of dense cloud, access restricted to Moses, Aaron, two sons and seventy Elders (Exod 24: 1-9).	<i>Sanctuary</i> : table of show bread, lampstand; incense altar and smoke of incense; restricted to priests.
Lower slopes, open access.	Outer court, open access.
Mt Sinai consecrated (Exod 19: 23).	Tabernacle consecrated (Lev 16).

At the end of Chapter 24 we read ;וַיִּשְׁכֵּן כְּבוֹד-ה' עַל-הַר סִינַי, וַיִּכְסְהוּ הָעָנָן שְׁשֵׁת יָמִים; וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, מִתּוֹךְ הָעָנָן. וַיִּמְרָא הַכְּבוֹד ה', כְּאֵשׁ אֲכָלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר, לְעֵינַי, בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וַיִּבְא מֹשֶׁה בְּתוֹךְ הָעָנָן, וַיַּעַל אֶל-הָהָר; וַיְהִי מֹשֶׁה, בְּהָר, אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. Now the *Kavod* of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain; and Moses remained on the mountain forty days

⁸⁶ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 61.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 62.

⁸⁸ Rabbi Molly Karp suggested that the Garden and Tower of Babel could fit this same blueprint.

⁸⁹ Here again, כְּבוֹד is rendered by JPS as “Presence.” I have transliterated it rather than use the JPS translation of “Presence” to avoid confusion with שָׁכַן, a verb that does appear in this passage as well for the sake of fidelity with the reading being proposed.

and forty nights.”⁹⁰ Here, appearance of the *Kavod* as a fire is not surprising. Having been told that the Moses and the others “saw the God of Israel,” the mention of the *Kavod* here serves to explicitly equate this visual dimension of the Divine, whatever it may be, with God directly. The description of the fire כָּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת, “as a consuming fire” is reminiscent of the burning bush where the same word, אָכַל, is used in the negative, that is, the bush אֵינֶנּוּ אֹכֶל, is not consumed. This parallel seems part of the larger reversal which is now being played out. One other element is also worthy of note. Alongside Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Abihu, and a group of 70 elders are called to the Mountain, all of whom “saw the God of Israel.” However, when the *Kavod* appears in the text wrapped in the cloud, only one may enter – Moses. Later, it will be the High Priest who is the the only one allowed to enter the Holy of Holies.

⁹⁰ Exodus 24:16-18, JPS 165.

Section IX: The Tabernacle

Immediately following this manifestation, the Israelites are required to bring materials for a particular purpose *בְּתוֹכָם וַיִּשְׁכְּנֵתִי; מִקִּדְשׁוֹ לִי*. “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”⁹¹ Here, we note the verb “וַיִּשְׁכְּנֵתִי” is the same as was used above in Exodus 24:16 to denote the *Kavod* on the mountain. God commands the creation of a space and accoutrements to recreate, as it were, the conditions on Sinai and the first item described for this purpose is the ark.

In the construction of the ark, the text revisits a motif heretofore unmentioned since the very beginning of the present study, namely, the *keruvim*. The *keruvim* were appointed to guard the Garden of Eden and wielded the flaming sword. Since Genesis, as we have seen, every other structural element that has stood in for the *keruvim* throughout Genesis and Exodus has been just that, a stand in. In Exodus 25: 17-22 we read of the very specific details for the materials and the position of the *keruvim*. *וַיִּנְוַעַדְתִּי לָךְ, אֲשֶׁם*. “There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.”⁹² This is an expression of the new paradigm in that the *keruvim* which were “real” at the Garden of Eden are now symbolically present as a design element on the ark and God, who was symbolically present by means of the flaming sword in Genesis promises some kind of manifestation from betwixt the ark’s *keruvim*. One wonders if the ark should be understood as a weapon. With the “sword” having been eliminated by the text, the ark,

⁹¹ Exodus 25:8, JPS 166.

⁹² Exodus 25:22, JPS 167.

perhaps some other kind of weapon, seems to replace it vis-à-vis its imagery. This certainly seems plausible given how this motif fits into the previously noted Hexateuchal chiasmus that concludes with the book of Joshua wherein we read that the ark was used by the army to conquer Canaan and fulfil God's promise.⁹³

The *keruvim* repeat again in the design of the tabernacle in both the *Mishkan* and the *parochet*. וְאֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן תַּעֲשֶׂה, עֲשֶׂר יְרִיעוֹת: אֵשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר, וְתַכְלֵת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי-כְרָבִים מַעֲשֶׂה חָשֵׁב, . . . תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם. . . וְעָשִׂיתָ פְּרָכֶת, תַּכְלֵת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי-וְאֵשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר; מַעֲשֶׂה חָשֵׁב יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָהּ, כְּרָבִים . . . “As for the Tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them. . . You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen; it shall have a design of cherubim worked into it.”⁹⁴ Each of these items, the *mishkan* and the *parokeht*, are coverings, each shielding the ark, and with it the manifestation of God from view. Once completed, one would encounter images of *keruvim* at various stages as one approached the ark from which God spoke. Like the two *keruvim* on the ark itself, these additional *keruvim* serve not only the function, by virtue of their proximity, of attending the Deity but shield the manifestation from view as did the עֲנַן, cloud, עֶשֶׁן, smoke, and עֶרְפֶּל, nimbus on Mount Sinai.

Among the various accoutrements of the Tabernacle are two altars. Exodus 27 describes the construction of the main altar where sacrifices will be offered and where אֵשׁ, תָּמִיד תֹּקֵד עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ-לֹּא תִכָּבֵה. “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out.”⁹⁵ Exodus 30 describes the construction of the secondary altar which will be

⁹³ Joshua 6:1-27.

⁹⁴ Exodus 26:1 and Exodus 26:31, JPS 168 and 170.

⁹⁵ Leviticus 6:6, JPS 217.

placed directly at the entrance to the Tabernacle where incense will be burned. Each of these fundamental pieces offers a functional dimension to the symbolism. The secondary incense altar creates a pleasing aroma from its incense but also makes smoke which, standing as it does outside the tent that holds the ark, shields the ark and its Divine manifestation from view. The location of this altar is also noteworthy because, as we have seen, attendants are also gatekeepers as was the case at Eden or the doorway of Lot's home.

Fire burns perpetually on the main altar where sacrifices are offered and reach some dimension of the Deity that is not present in the tent, as for example, the ram of the ordination offering. וְהִקְטַרְתָּ אֶת-כָּל-הָאֵיל הַמִּזְבֵּחַהּ, עֲלֶיהָ הוּא לַיהוָה; רִיחַ נִיחֻם, אֲשֶׁר לַיהוָה הוּא. “Turn all of the ram into smoke upon the altar. It is a burnt offering to the Lord, a pleasing odor, an offering by fire to the Lord.”⁹⁶

The rest of the book of Exodus, apart from the episode of the Golden Calf, largely describes the fulfilment of many of the commandments presented after the Ten Commandments that form the basis of the Tabernacle architecture.

In the midst of the legislation surrounding the Ten Commandments at the Sinai Theophany, one fire-related directive stands out. כִּי-תִצַּא אֵשׁ וּמִצָּאָהּ קִצִּים, וְנֹאכַל גְּדִישׁ, אוֹ הַקָּמָה, אוֹ הַשְּׂדֵה--שְׁלֵם יְשֻׁלָּם, הַמִּבְעֵר אֶת-הַבְּעֵרָה. “When a fire is started and spreads to thorns, so that stacked, standing, or growing grain is consumed, he who started the fire must make restitution.”⁹⁷ This verse draws on one recurring dimension of the pattern, namely, the destruction of vegetation. However, elsewhere, the fire that destroys vegetation is more

⁹⁶ Exodus 29:18, JPS 176-177.

⁹⁷ Exodus 22:5, JPS 160.

obviously of Divine origin. Examples of that destruction include Sodom and Gomorrah and the plague of *barad*. The Akeidah where Isaac is saddled with wood and the theophany of the bush are other examples of this element however, the bush, as we know, is not consumed and neither is Isaac. Here the specific mention of the kinds of vegetation may be relevant. That thorns should be in close proximity to grain suggests that this is a transitional space between agricultural land and uncultivated land which, may be symbolic of the larger “wilderness.” The verb אכל is the same used at the bush theophany. One difficulty is the origin of the fire. The first half of the verse seems to suggest the fire is a natural phenomenon which, in biblical theology, would mean it originated with God. The second half of the verse says that a person set the fire but it isn't clear if it's accidental or arson. The possibility of restitution suggests an accident because purposeful crimes tend to have stronger punishments. The forced restitution also suggests that only God may destroy vegetation, at least with fire. Elsewhere, when mistakes are made, people pay with their lives.

As the narrative of Exodus continues, there are some limited appearances of God as at Exodus 33:9 where we learn וְהָיָה, כִּבְּאֵל מֹשֶׁה הָאֱלֹהִים, יֵרֵד עִמּוֹד הָעָנָן, וְעָמַד פְּתַח הָאֹהֶל; וְדִבֶּר, עִם-מֹשֶׁה. “And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses.”⁹⁸ The cloud's appearance specifically at the entrance to the tent is significant. As we have seen, the attendant appears at various entrances including the flaming sword at the gate to Eden, the doorway in Sodom, and the incense altar outside the tent.

⁹⁸ Exodus 33:9, JPS 186. Two verses later we read that God spoke to Moses פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים, face to face.

Later in the same chapter an episode appears that describes Moses's desire to see the *Kavod* and concludes with a statement that Moses may not see God's face.⁹⁹ It is worthy of mention here because the *Kavod* is a way God appears in a fiery display. The proximity of this episode to the appearance of the pillar of cloud outside the tent would indicate that this is, indeed, another appearance of the same type. However, the contradictions around what Moses may and may not see in light of what he has clearly already seen and continues to see, suggest that here, the *Kavod* is in some way anomalous and represents some other type of appearance. The episode concludes, as it were, in the next chapter where "The Lord came down in a cloud" and "passed before him"¹⁰⁰ which is more consistent with the way God has appeared in the text.

The book of Exodus ends with a repetition of various elements of our theme.

When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.¹⁰¹

With the Tabernacle built, the various incarnations of the Divine seemingly in residence, instructions given, and the priests invested, the time has come to inaugurate the *Mishkan*. Leviticus 9 describes the preparation of the priests and the opening sacrifice of the public cult. After the sacrifice we read the following. וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, אֵל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, וַיִּצְאוּ, וַיִּבְרְכוּ אֶת-הָעָם; וַיֵּרָא כְּבוֹד-ה', אֵל-כָּל-הָעָם. וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ, מִלִּפְנֵי ה', וַתֹּאכַל עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, אֶת-הָעֹלָה וְאֶת-הַקְּלָבִים; וַיֵּרָא כָּל-

⁹⁹ See Exodus 33:17-23.

¹⁰⁰ Exodus 34:5-6, JPS 188.

¹⁰¹ Exodus 40:33a-38, JPS 205.

הָעָם וַיְרַנְּנוּ, וַיְפָלְאוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם. “When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces.”¹⁰² In Exodus 20, when God commanded the creation of an altar, God promised to bless the people for doing so. However, here, Moses and Aaron bless the people. Previously, when there has been a human stand-in for the Divine, it was Moses. Aaron now joins him immediately after his consecration as high priest as a signal that God’s blessing may now be received through the priesthood. The manifestation of God consuming the burnt offering is crucial.

The importance of the theophany in the newly consecrated tabernacle cannot be exaggerated. It renders the tabernacle the equivalent of Mount Sinai: God’s presence was made manifest at both places. But whereas the people experienced God’s voice at Sinai (Exod 20:18), only an elite saw God (Exod 24: 10-11). In contrast, all of the people were privileged to see God sanction the inauguration of the regular cult in the tabernacle. Thus P, in effect, regards the theophany at the tabernacle as more important than the theophany at Sinai. Nonetheless, P has equalized the two theophanies in its supplement to the Sinaitic account, which relates that Yahweh’s *Kavod*—fire encased in a cloud—made itself visible at Sinai (Exod 24:17) just as it subsequently did at the tabernacle inauguration (Lev 9:6b, 23b, 24a). Still, according to this P verse it is not Yahweh’s *Kavod* but Yahweh who will be seen by all of Israel. Therefore, the possibility must be entertained—presuming the accuracy of the MT—that P deliberately allowed this description of the theophany in this verse to be unqualified by Yahweh’s *Kavod*, or any other metonym, though Yahweh’s *Kavod* is what they actually saw (vv. 6b, 23b). In this way the absolute equivalence of the tabernacle theophany with that of Sinai is stressed. The equivalence of the tabernacle to Sinai is an essential, indeed indispensable, axiom of P. The tabernacle in effect, becomes a portable Sinai, an assurance of the permanent presence of the Deity in Israel’s midst.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Leviticus 9:23-24, JPS 226.

¹⁰³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 89.

Section X: Nadav and Abihu

Just as the revelation at Sinai concluded with the episode of the Golden calf, here too, there is a troublesome episode that follows the theophany. וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא. “Now Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which he had not enjoined upon them.”¹⁰⁴ The read of “alien fire” for אש זרה seems correct. “Foreign fire” might also work here. Having established the *Mishkan* theophany as parallel to Sinai which was followed immediately by an act of idolatry, we may assume then that their sin is connected to idolatry. If fire is a manifestation of the Deity, and remembering that the golden calf was called both a god and by the name Yahweh,¹⁰⁵ then Nadav and Abihu are guilty of not just a procedural error in the cult practice. They have brought a foreign deity into Yahweh’s *Mikdash* and the punishment, which we read in the next verse makes more sense. וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה', “And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.”¹⁰⁶

Mary Douglas suggests that “the names of the sons of Aaron give us the hint to read the fire stories together across Exodus and Leviticus. Nadab means ‘willingness, Abijah means ‘God is my father’ (or Abihu, ‘He is my father’). This suggests that their deaths are a sequel to an earlier burning story in which their father was involved.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Leviticus 10:1, JPS 226. NRSV renders אש זרה as “unholy fire.” Friedman, p. 204, has “unfitting fire.”

¹⁰⁵ Exodus 32:4-5.

¹⁰⁶ Leviticus 10:2, JPS 226.

¹⁰⁷ Douglas, 202.

Though she continues by noting a number of parallels between Exodus and Leviticus, she stops short of drawing a conclusion about the, אש זרה.¹⁰⁸

Milgrom proposes a read, admittedly speculative, that connects the fire of the inaugural sacrifice and the death of Nadav and Abihu.

Whence the fire? The silence of the text allows for ample speculation. The most probable answer is that it came from the adytum. The fire passed through the shrine, where it kindled the incense on the inner altar, incinerated Nadav and Abihu (10:2), and then exited into the court and consumed the sacrifices on the altar...

Anthropologists see the altar fire as a gateway to the other world through which offerings are transmitted to God and through which the power of God is directly manifested to humanity. The correctness of this observation is accentuated by a Priestly rule concerning the altar fire: it must never be allowed to die out. This admonition is given twice in two consecutive verses... The reason is now apparent. Because the fire is of divine origin it must be perpetuated. The fire is symbolic, representing God's presence; if the fire goes out God will have left. Furthermore, a more pragmatic purpose underlies this injunction. Just as the initial appearance of the divine fire signified God's approval, so every sacrifice offered on the same altar will, with God's grace, also merit God's acceptance.¹⁰⁹

To this I will add an observation that the sudden conflagration of one fire in close proximity to another can extinguish the second fire. Take for example, lighting a match from a burning candle. Frequently, as the match's tip flares up, the candle is extinguished. We may imagine a similar experience happening in the *Mikdash* which would not only explain the elements on which Milgrom comments but would address the אש זרה and complete the parallel that Douglas tries to draw with Exodus. Particularly, if our above reading is correct that the ark should be understood as a weapon, then Milgrom's suggestion that God's fire here originates in the adytum is strengthened in light of the possibility that the אש זרה may be understood as a foreign deity. Whereas

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 202-205.

¹⁰⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus* 90-91.

Aaron created a golden calf effigy, his sons summon a living foreign fire deity. Just as God subdued the primordial deep and the god of the Nile, God extinguishes the foreign fire too.

Section XI: Priests as Keruvim

One last element completes the residency of Yahweh in the shrine which, we may now say, is symbolic, namely, the priesthood. Certainly deities need clergy, particularly if sacrifice and the perpetuation of a fire is a dimension of worship. But the cult priests of Yahweh are more than just sanctuary maintenance workers. Their actualization draws heavily on the mythology herein discussed. They are a stand in for the *keruvim* which we encountered at the gate to the Garden of Eden and who have been transmogrified in the various ways we have noted. It is now important to recall the observation that cherubs were mixed-species creatures.

The Torah does not offer any description of the *keruvim* but the book of Ezekiel, a priestly source, offers us the following. וְאַרְבָּעָה פָּנִים, לְאֶחָד: פָּנֵי הָאֶחָד פָּנֵי הַכְּרוּב, וּפָנֵי הַשָּׁנִי פָּנֵי אָדָם, וְהַשְּׁלִישִׁי פָּנֵי אֶרְיָה, וְהָרְבִיעִי פָּנֵי-נֶשֶׁר “Each one had four faces: one was a cherub’s face, the second a human face, the third a lion’s face, and the fourth and eagle’s face.”¹¹⁰ Figures like the cherubim were common in the mythos of the world of the bible and it is not surprising that we should see their continued appearance in the cult and in the text extending, as we see from Ezekiel, into other parts of the Bible as well.

Cherubim exist in Israel’s cult—more precisely, inside the sanctuary, in woven form, on the inner curtains and veil of the tabernacle; carved on the inner walls and doors of the Solomonic temple; and, in sculpted form, inside the adytum of both sanctuaries. Being ensconced inside the sanctuary, all these cherubim were visible only to priests (the cherubim inside the adytum to no one), who were admitted to their presence because they too, wearing garments of mixed seed, symbolically became cherubim...qualified to attend to the service of Yahweh...No differently from the cherub guarding the entrance to the sacred garden, armed Levites guard the entrance into the sacred enclosure.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ezekiel 10:14, JPS 1171. The verses that follow add further elements like wings, hands, and a wheel manifestation. Also present is the *Kavod*.

¹¹¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus* 238.

Without being able to actually change their own nature, the priests of Yahweh's cult changed themselves by putting on clothes symbolic of the transformation. Whether we call these clothes a uniform, a costume, or vestments, they convey a meaning, here mythological. The garments are made of various mixtures and are normally forbidden for regular use but, apparently, are required to complete the symbolic transformation of the priests into the cherubim. The *Mishkan* itself which houses the ark is made of linen with blue, purple, and crimson yarns (wool) and woven with images of cherubim (Ex. 26:1) as is the *parokhet* (Ex. 26:31). The same combination is used to make the ephod, breastplate, and belt of the of the high priest's garments (Ex. 28:6, 15 and 39:29). Milgrom further notes that this mixture of linen and wool is limited to the belt of the ordinary priest (Ex. 39:29) and is further limited to the single blue thread of the non-clergy Israelite in the otherwise linen tassel, צִיצִית (Numbers 15:38).¹¹² So the closer one draws to the seat of God's presence, that is to say, the adytum, the greater the number of mixed-material garments one must wear. The further from it, the less mixed material one expects to find.

Extending the priestly garb to the regular clothing of the non-priestly Jew is one of the radical reforms of Leviticus. We are accustomed to thinking about the rigidity of the Israelite caste system – High Priest, Regular Priest, Levites, and everyone else. We see this division in the people reflected in the divisions in space relative to who can go into various precincts of the Tabernacle. However, as extensively noted by Milgrom in his study, actions taken by any or all of the people have ramifications inside the

¹¹² Ibid., 236.

sanctuary. Sin anywhere committed by anyone may pollute the altar. This recasts God's declaration to the people just prior to the Sinai theophany that *וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מְמֻלְכֹת כֹּהֲנִים*, "but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹¹³ The spiritual wellbeing of the community is dependent on every one of its members. The inclusion of the *tekhelet* on the garments worn by the non-priests makes this no metaphor. Some regular occurrence in the daily lives of the Israelites demanded that they behave like the priesthood. Every Israelite is a cherub in service of the Divine.

¹¹³ Exodus 19:6, JPS 153.

Later Traditions and Conclusions

Those episodes and mentions of fire contained in this study comprise a major component of the development of Israelite religion. In the texts presented, fire indicates a manifestation of the Divine. The motif of fire recurs numerous times. Major components in the narrative describe God by means of a theophany of fire or draw on mythology connected to such descriptions where there is significant intertextual dialogue. There is no incidental fire listed in the texts of the narrative arc from creation to the formation of the Israelite cult.

Biblical authors draw these elements, initially, from non-Israelite traditions where fire appeared as a weapon. At creation the weapon belonged to the Deity. At the garden, to the gatekeepers. Ultimately, it is around these two primary elements – the Deity and the attendant that all of the layers develop. This is particularly true for the elements used to describe spaces. The elements reorganize over and over. Part of this larger arc includes a shift from spontaneous or independent theophany to a well-tended manifestation through a fire tended by a priesthood but facilitated, in some way, by the entire nation.

Yahweh's worship at the Tabernacle requires not only a well-tended fire, but recasting the various mythological components of the other theophanies – all of which are based in fire. The high priest, priesthood, and, indeed, the “nation of priests” all stand in for divine attendants to varying degrees by virtue of symbolic transformation achieved by wearing garments of mixed plant and animal materials. They thus become cherubim and perpetuate the ongoing presence of God among the people. The theophanies themselves and the symbolic variations enacted in cult practice are connected to larger

patterns in the narrative arc of the Torah and cannot be discounted from an understanding of the text.

These patterns continue beyond the above presented texts. While full treatment of all available Biblical material is beyond the scope of this study, rich material does continue to develop throughout the Bible and beyond. For example, the episode of Korach, in which Korach, a Levite, challenges Moses and incurs the wrath of God. וַיִּקְהַל אֶל-כָּל-הָעֵדָה, אֶל-פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד; וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-ה', אֶל-כָּל-הָעֵדָה הַשְּׂמֵחַת לְפָנָיו. “Korach gathered the whole community against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Then the Presence [כבוד] of the Lord appeared to the whole community...”¹¹⁴ We have abundantly noted the *Kavod* itself to be a manifestation of fire. The episode, which occurs at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, concludes with extraordinary punishments.

Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!” And a fire [אש] went forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering incense.¹¹⁵

None of the fire manifestations present in the passage are out of the ordinary. The fire consuming the two hundred fifty men offering incense is reminiscent of Nadav and Abihu. The people being swallowed by the ground seems connected to the scorched earth episodes where fire represented God's wrath as at Sodom and Gomorrah. What is unusual is the connection here to Sheol, the biblical underworld. Perhaps their worship is connected to that of Molek, an underworld deity also venerated with fire. The connection

¹¹⁴ Numbers 16:19, JPS 321.

¹¹⁵ Numbers 16:31-35, JPS 322.

flames His servants.”¹¹⁹ Here, in a single verse, we see many connections to earlier passages. The רוחות remind the reader of the רוח אלקים, the Divine wind, which blew against the waters at creation and which dried the land for the crossing of the sea. The adjective, להט, here rendered “fiery” connects the reader to the sword of Eden and to the magicians of Pharaoh’s court. The “messengers” could be those who visited Abraham or they could be more general standing in for the cherubs in so many other places. Is the fire standing in for the Divine reminding us of the burning bush, the *Kavod*, the descent on the mountain? Elements and allusions in the rest of this chapter of Psalms bear out all these possibilities and others as well.

The central practice of rabbinic Judaism is the study of Torah. In the absence of a central shrine, whether Temple or Tabernacle, rabbinic Judaism replaces the trappings of sacrifice with a love of text. It is not surprising, then, that we see the language of fire transferred from God to the Torah.

The cornerstone of rabbinic associations of fire and the Torah is based upon a biblical verse that is found near the start of Moses' farewell song; that is, *ve-zot ha-berakhah*, in Deuteronomy 33. The key phrase transliterated reads: *mimino eshdath lamo* (33:2). In the NJPS translation this is rendered as Lightning flashing at them from His right. The note on this text states: "Meaning of Hebrew *mimino eshdath* uncertain, perhaps a place name." According to the masoretic tradition "*eshdat*" is to be read as two words. This results in the traditional rendering of the verse as: from His right [hand] a fiery law [was given] to them. Targum Onkelos translates this phrase into Aramaic somewhat differently: His right [hand] wrote [it]; from amidst the fire He gave the Torah to us.¹²⁰

Verman goes on to illustrate the further development of rabbinic exegesis connected to this verse from Deuteronomy as well as others. One key passage from the Talmud Yerushalmi uses this verse as a proof text and is itself deeply influential on many

¹¹⁹ Psalms 104:4, JPS 1540.

¹²⁰ Mark Verman, “The Torah as Divine Fire” in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35,2 (2007), 94.

subsequent texts. ר"פ בשם רשב"ל התורה שנתן לו הקב"ה למשה נתנה לו אש לבנה חרותה באש. "R. Pinchas says in the name of R. Shimon b. Lakish: The Torah that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses was given to him [*nitanah lo*] from white fire inscribed by black fire. It was fire, mixed with fire, hewn from fire and given by fire, as it is written: *From His right a fiery law to them* (Deut. 33:2) – Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 6:1, f 25b)."¹²¹

Recasting the Torah with the same imagery used to describe the Divine is not the only way post-Biblical Judaism has repurposed the various textual elements and imaginings we have examined. There are current practices centered on the home for Shabbat night which draw on a long history and represent a further development of many of the themes discussed. Among the most widespread and longest held practices is the lighting of candles prior to the Sabbath. This practice was one of the ritual moments that triggered my imagination and prompted this study. This practice is first noted as early as the Mishnah and was the subject of dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees. "At issue was the interpretation of Exodus 35:3, 'You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day.' The Pharisees held that even though no *new* light could be kindled, lights already begun could be allowed to burn. The Sadducees believed that even fires already lit were prohibited and had to be doused before Shabbat set in."¹²² It is worth pointing out that if fire is a manifestation of God, then the commandment of Exodus 35:3 which prohibits changes made to fires serves to limit the activity of the

¹²¹ Ibid., 97.

¹²² Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Shabbat at Home*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries* vol. 7 (Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013) 43, 53.

Divine manifestation on the day on which the Divine rests. The dispute between the Sadducees and the Pharisees is simply a difference of opinion about how to do that. A similar dispute existed between the Karaites and the Rabbinic Jews.¹²³ Furthermore, Rabbinic Jews were similarly disagreed as late as the tenth century and perhaps beyond as to whether one says a blessing for Shabbat candles and if so, when.¹²⁴ A practice that developed was for those women who lit candles to cover their eyes prior to saying the blessing. One explanation is the generally accepted notion that blessings should precede actions. However, it was understood that if one said the blessing, this was sufficient to accept Shabbat upon oneself and so one would then not be able to light the candles. Shielding one's eyes, saying the blessing, and then enjoying the light became the ritual. Given that the practice of making a blessing is in flux until well into the middle ages, it is appropriate to ask whether the practice of covering one's eyes as described was proactively added when a blessing developed or is this explanation added later. That is to say, is the custom of covering one's eyes one that already existed for other reasons?

I would like to suggest that the practice predates the explanation. If fire serves as a manifestation of God, then covering one's eyes serves to create a barrier between one's self and the fire, that is, between one's self and the Divine just as the smoke on the mountain, the incense of the tabernacle, or the tabernacle itself create a barrier. This motif is reinforced by an explanation that the later codes brought to fixing the minimum number of candles at two, namely, that each candle represents the active verb in each version of the Ten Commandments for observing the Sabbath - *zachor* and *shamor*.

¹²³ Ibid., 54.

¹²⁴ Loc. cit.

Lighting two candles for Shabbat recreates both instances of theophany at Sinai – Exodus and Deuteronomy – where God was manifest as fire. Recreating these conditions was, as we saw, a particular intention of Tabernacle practices and architecture. There are still additional elements of this recreation present in contemporary Shabbat rituals.

A tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud says that two angels enter the Jewish home on Friday night¹²⁵ one good and one evil, each forced to bless or curse according to the preparedness of the home for the Sabbath. When fire is lit, God becomes manifest, and angels enter the home, one angel for each candle. The development of the liturgical poem *Shalom Aleichem* in the eighteenth century so long after the Talmud was closed suggests that this idea of angels in the home is very deeply embedded in the Jewish psyche. The likening of the Shabbat Table to an altar complete with two Showbreads and salt for the sacrifice resonates with the Tabernacle imagery and further reminds us of the feast eaten by Moses, Aaron, and the Elders at Sinai at Sinai.

At the conclusion of the Sabbath, a number of elements of the Havdalah ritual appear to have connections as well. First, the verses that precede the Havdalah blessings all have themes that invoke God as a source of victory. As Marc Brettler points out

None [of the verses] is directly connected to Shabbat, but they all relate to deliverance. Four use the noun ‘salvation’ (*y’shu’ah*), and one the verb “save” (*hoshi’a*). Of the remaining verses, two depict God as “Lord of Hosts,” an epithet suggesting the image of God as military general, leading angelic hosts to battle. The only prose verse, Esther 8:16, refers to the rejoicing of the Jewish community after the defeat of Haman. This theme of deliverance seems unrelated to *Havdalah*, which follows it, but as we saw in some of the *z’mirot*, in the Middle Ages, Shabbat came to anticipate military deliverance.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ BT Shabbat, 119b.

¹²⁶ Marc Brettler, *Shabbat at Home*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People’s Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries* vol. 7 (Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013) 166, 169.

This theme of military victory seems paired well with an understanding of Creation, which Havdalah reenacts, as a cosmic battle. The Havdalah candle is the Divine weapon. It is the light that strikes out at primordial darkness. It is the flaming sword of Eden marking the end of our day of paradise. It is the blade brought against Pharaoh at the Exodus, memory of which is invoked over and over again throughout the Sabbath. The candle is the Divine Presence of the desert Mishkan whose view is shielded by wafts of incense, here replaced by spices. The sweet smell reminds us of the aroma of sacrifice, the first wafts of which ascended from Noah's altar after he was delivered from his own watery chaos. In gratitude he also planted a vineyard and we too make a blessing with the "fruit of the vine."

The Torah's account of God's manifestation through fire permeates Jewish tradition, even to today. The forms, elements, and motifs connected to this kind of theophany serve as a blueprint for layers of text throughout the biblical tradition and beyond. The relationship between God and the people continues to find form in these patterns. Indeed, the Eternal Flame of our ancient faith whose light, a reminder of which is found in every synagogue, continues to burn in the text and ritual of our spiritual homes. Created, as we are, in the image of the Eternal One, our souls are also radiant for נֶר ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם "a person's soul is the lamp of the Divine."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Proverbs 20:27.

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תם ונשלם, שבה לא-ל, בורא עולם.