

The Eye in the Torah: Ocular Desire in Midrashic Hermeneutic

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It seems to have become a commonplace of critical discourse that Judaism is the religion in which God is heard but not seen. Thus in a recent article by Martin Jay we can find the following remarks:

Whereas some commentators contrast the Jewish taboo on graven images or seeing the face of God with the Christian toleration for the word made flesh in the incarnation, a toleration that supports the visible sacraments and the mimetic *imitatio Dei*, Ellul staunchly asserts the iconoclastic impulse in both faiths. Not for him is the contention that Christianity contains both Hellenic and Hebraic impulses. Instead, he insists that like Judaism, it worships an invisible, non-theophanous God, a God who speaks to humans who only listen.¹

Reading Jay's text, as well as Ellul's text, from which it dissents, I am interested in what is assumed, hidden, implied, and mystified in the comparative expression "like Judaism." Both Ellul and Jay (and nearly everyone else) casually accept the characterization of Judaism (a reified

For Dr. Ruth Stein.

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All translations from the Hebrew and Aramaic are my own unless otherwise cited.

1. Martin Jay, "The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism," *Poetics Today* 9 (1988): 307–8; hereafter abbreviated "RH."

fiction of four thousand years of a culture) as a religion that devalues the experience of vision of God (and vision in general) and relegates it to the realm of idolatry. It is an absolutely unexamined axiom that "Hebraic impulses" must be toward an invisible God, who does not show Himself to humankind and only speaks that they may hear. Jay's statement reveals one source of the confusion that has led to the consensus that in Judaism God cannot be seen: it casually equates a "taboo on graven images or seeing the face of God" with an assertion that God is invisible and speaks but does not show Himself to humans. In fact, a threefold distinction must be drawn among (1) a theosophical doctrine that God is a being who cannot be seen; (2) a normative stricture (absolute or contingent) on seeing a God who can be seen; and (3) a stricture on making images of a visible God. Jay elides all three of these. In this essay I will try to show that the first of these is false for Talmudic Judaism, and the second is relative and contingent. The third is, of course, an absolute stricture.

My construction of the position of the eye in Rabbinic Judaism² (and Christianity) represents almost a reversal of the roles "Hebraic" and "Hellenic." A powerful case can be made that *only* under Hellenic influence do Jewish cultures exhibit any anxiety about the corporeality or visibility of God; the biblical and Rabbinic religions were quite free of such influences and anxieties. Thus I would identify Greek influences on Judaism in the Middle Ages as being the major force for *repressing* the visual.³ The Neoplatonic and Aristotelian revision of Judaism

2. I have concentrated here on the "classical" texts of the canon of so-called normative Rabbinic Judaism, where this issue has been little discussed in the scholarly literature. For a discussion of this topic in other texts, see Christopher Rowland, "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 10 (Dec. 1979): 137-54, and Ira Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 13 (Dec. 1982): 123-46. It becomes increasingly clear that Rabbinic Judaism cannot be strictly separated from earlier apocalyptic or later mystical traditions, but the exact nature of the connections is a present agenda of research.

3. A similar point has been made by Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 270-71, where Stroumsa argues that the idea of the "total immateriality of God" developed in Christianity under the "pervasive influence of Platonism." On the other hand, "the encounter between Jewish thought and Platonic philosophy, was severed soon after Philo, and Jewish exegesis was left to struggle with biblical anthropomorphisms without the help of

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undertaken by the Jewish scholastics was so successful that it has resulted in the near-total forgetting of the biblical and Rabbinic traditions of God's visibility. W. J. T. Mitchell's characterization of the Rabbinic tradition is a perfect example of this "forgetting." In order to position Judaism in a typology of cultures, Mitchell cites Moses Maimonides. Mitchell's reading of Maimonides is well-founded; the problem lies rather in the identification of Maimonides as if he typified the old Rabbinic tradition.⁴ In my view, he represents a distinct departure from that tradition. This Platonic departure was indeed marked and condemned as such by many of his contemporaries, but it has become the almost unchallenged orthodoxy of later Judaism as well as of the critical tradition.⁵ The memory of having seen God in the Bible and the desire to have that experience again were a vital part of Rabbinic religion. They constituted, moreover, a key element in the study of Torah, the making of midrash.

The two moments, according to Rabbinic tradition, in which God was held to have shown Himself to Israel were the two high points of the *Heilsgeschichte*, namely the giving of the Torah and the crossing of the Red Sea. At least in theory, the most severely textual/aural of all experiences was the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. If there is any experience that ought a priori to be describable as involving "a God who speaks to humans who only listen," it is certainly this one. The Torah itself already explicitly indicates that at the former event God made Himself visible to the people. In Exod. 24:7–11 we read,

And [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the ears of the People, and they said, All that we have heard we will do and we will hear. . . . And Moses and Aaron, Nadav, Avihu and the seventy elders went up. And they saw the God of Israel and under His legs it was like a paving of sapphire and bright like the sky. And unto the nobles of the Israelites He did no damage, but they saw God and they ate and drank.

the most effective of tools: the Platonic conception of a purely immaterial being." My only dissent from Stroumsa would be from his implication that this constitutes a deficiency in Rabbinic Judaism. In a full-length study of the body in Talmudic culture, I hope to argue that the Rabbinic belief in the corporeality of God is part of an entire cultural-semiotic system with major consequences for representation and social practice vis-à-vis women, the body, and sex.

4. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), p. 32.

5. In my forthcoming book I hope to be able to explore these historical changes within Judaism more fully. It is important to note that vital strains of the older tradition were maintained in the Kabbalah, which for all its Neoplatonism was often closer in spirit to the religion of the Rabbis of the Talmud than was the theology of the Jewish scholastics.

It is actually quite astounding that Judaism could ever be described as having an invisible God, given the evidence of these verses and many others. In the Torah God *can* be seen, and indeed this conclusion is well accepted in biblical studies today.⁶ Normally one is not permitted to see God, and it is very dangerous to do so, which is why here the Torah makes explicit the fact that in this special moment the people were vouchsafed this vision without there being any danger.⁷

It will be more significant to establish, however, that in Rabbinic religion, even after the contact with Greek culture starting in the fourth century B.C., there was continued belief in and desire for the vision of God. We can find many texts that indicate such belief and desire. At the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Torah tells us that "all of the People saw the voices" (Exod. 20:14). On this verse the midrash comments, "Rabbi Ishmael says, They saw what could be seen and heard what could be heard," but Rabbi Akiva, who, as we shall see, strongly privileges seeing, interprets, "They saw what can be heard."⁸ At the time of the giving of the Torah, even that which normally only could be heard could be seen! Thus it is not surprising that that which can be seen was seen at that time.

I find the most dramatic counterevidence to the claim of purely linguistic/aural revelation in that, for the midrash, sight of God inhabits the very heart of revelation as part of its essential structure, and even the very communication of the Law is at least partly visual. This shift from the aural to the visual in the revelation is signaled in midrash by a shift in understanding of the demonstrative pronoun.⁹ Demonstratives can mean in three ways: as anaphora and kataphora they refer to discourse, that is, to that which is heard about and not present to sight at the moment of speech. As deixis, however, they invoke an actual movement of pointing on the part of the speaker, necessarily, therefore, designating an object present in the field of sight. It is indeed

6. For a full collection of biblical passages that refer to people seeing God, see G. W. W. Baudissin, "'Gott schauen' in der alttestamentlichen Religion," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 18 (1915): 173-239. See also James Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 7 (1960): 31-38.

7. Barr makes the same point: "There is however, and I think from very early times, the tradition not so much that the deity is invisible as that it is deadly for man to see him" (Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism," p. 34).

8. *The Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. and ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 3 vols. (1933-35; Philadelphia, 1961), 2:266; hereafter abbreviated *M*. I have provided my own translations rather than use Lauterbach's translations of this text.

9. In her brilliant text "Sacred Language and Open Text," Betty Roitman has analyzed the midrashic understanding of the demonstrative in ways that partly intersect with, partly complement, and partly differ from mine. Her concern is with its marking of a "sememe of concretization, of recognition, and of singularity" (Roitman, "Sacred Language and Open Text," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick [New Haven, Conn., 1986], p. 161) whereas mine is, of course, with the sememe of visibility.

remarkable that the Rabbis of the midrash almost invariably (if not invariably) read demonstratives in the commandments of God as deictics. Thus, in the following passage from *The Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, the early midrash on Exodus, we find a whole series of such demonstratives read as deictics with quite striking results:

This month shall be for you [Exod. 12:12]. Rabbi Ishmael says: Moses showed the new moon to Israel and said to them: In this way shall you see and fix the new moon for the generations. Rabbi Akiva says: This is one of the three things that were difficult for Moses to understand and all of which God pointed out to him with His finger. And thus you say: “And *these* are they which are unclean for you” (Lev. 11:29). And thus: “And *this* is the work of the candelabrum” (Num. 8:4). [*M*, 1:15–16]

Owing to the midrashic conviction that a demonstrative always denotes deixis, at least two of the verses cited here undergo remarkable semantic transitions. The most obvious reading of the Exodus verse is that God is referring to the month as an abstract entity—a passing of a certain amount of time—and saying, this upcoming month, this month of Nissan, will be for you the most important of months. Such a rendering takes the demonstrative as kataphora, referring to that which is yet to be mentioned in the discourse. Yet because the Rabbis insist on the deictic reading of the demonstrative, they are forced to understand the verse as referring to a concrete and visible object, the moon. A similar thing happens in the case of the verse from Leviticus. Again it seems the demonstrative is referring to that which is heard in the language of the verse, that is, to the *list* of the unclean animals; however, as the midrash reads the text, as deixis, there is an actual pointing to the animals themselves. What is significant in the present context is not so much the shift in meaning the verses undergo, but the implication of this deixis, drawn so explicitly by Rabbi Akiva: namely, that God’s finger—the instrument of pointing—was also visible to Moses at the time of this revelation and that this visual moment—this primacy of the eye with its capacity for immediately grasping that which is absent in purely linguistic expression—is that which made possible the very communication of these laws between God and Israel. Already we can see that we have powerful counterevidence to the commonplace description of an invisible God and purely aural revelation in Judaism.

The implication of this text for our concerns was finely and explicitly drawn in a somewhat later midrashic text, which can be taken as a commentary on the one just cited:

Rabbi Assi said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: One who blesses the New Moon in its time is as if he had received the face of the

Divine Presence, for it says here *This Month*, and it says there *This is My God, and I will beautify Him* (Exod. 15:2).¹⁰

According to my understanding, this text is best read as an indirect reference to the previous one. That is to say, we have not only a linguistic analogy here (*gezerah shavah*),¹¹ but a stronger claim for thematic analogy, or even for mimetic *imitatio dei*.¹² God has shown His finger when He said "This Month," and the proper response must be that we point back at Him and say "This is my God." In any case, what has been emphasized so clearly in this text is the visibility of God, a God Whose presence can be received and to which we can pay homage.

Since the verse "*This is My God, and I will beautify Him*" is part of the Song at the Sea, the praise that the Jews rendered God immediately after the miracle of crossing the Red Sea, the Rabbis understood as well that at that moment in history God showed Himself clearly to all of the people present. Had He not done so, they could hardly have pointed at Him and said, "This is My God." Thus we find the deictic reading of the demonstrative pronoun once more giving rise to a theosophical understanding of the visibility of the Godhead. This point is made quite explicitly in another text of the *Mekilta* where Rabbi Eliezer says, "Any servant at the Sea saw what neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel nor any of the other prophets have seen, for it says: *This is my God, and I will beautify Him*" (*M*, 2:24). The Israelites could only have made such a declaration if they saw God and could point to Him with their deictic fingers.

Again, however, we are not dependent only on the Rabbinic-midrashic tradition for the theophany at the Red Sea. It is signaled in the biblical discourse itself in several ways, most dramatically in verses that indicate God Himself physically, as it were, split the sea. We can find fragments of this tradition in such poetic verses as Ps. 77:17, "The waters *saw You*, O God, the waters *saw You* and were convulsed" (my emphasis). Midrashic texts have rendered these fragmentary memoirs of God's self-showing at the sea very explicit and unmistakable, as in the following text:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea (Exod. 14:21). The sea began to resist him. Moses said, "in the Name of the Holiness," but it did not yield. *The Holiness, Blessed be He, revealed Himself*; the sea began to flee, as it says, "The sea *saw* and fled" (Ps. 114:3).

Its *mashal*; to what is the matter similar? To a king of flesh and blood, who had two gardens, one inside the other. He sold the

10. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 42a.

11. Compare Roitman, "Sacred Language and Open Text," p. 162.

12. For a somewhat similar reading of this passage, see A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, 2 vols. (Oxford and London, 1927-37), 2:103.

inner one, and the purchaser came to enter, but the guard did not allow him. He said to him, "In the name of the king," but he did not yield. He showed him king's signet, but he did not yield until the king came. Once the king came, the guard began to flee. He said, "All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the king and you did not yield. Now, why are you fleeing?" He said, "Not from you am I fleeing, but from the king am I fleeing."

Similarly, Moses came and stood at the sea. He said to him, "in the name of the Holiness," and it did not yield. He showed him the rod, and it did not yield, *until the Holiness, Blessed be He, revealed Himself in His glory*. The sea began to flee, as it is said, "The sea saw and fled" (Ps. 114:3). Moses said to him, "All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the Holiness, Blessed be He, and you did not submit. Now, 'what has happened to you, O sea, that you flee?' (Ps. 114:5)." He answered him, "Not from before you am I fleeing, son of Amram, but 'from before the Master, tremble Earth from before the God of Jacob' (Ps. 114:7-8)." (*M*, 1:227-28]

This midrash is a very complex hermeneutic and cultural document, which I have treated at length in another context.¹³ Here we are interested in a thematic aspect. The sea refused to be moved until God showed Himself in His Glory over it, until God revealed Himself. The "Glory," as is well known to students of biblical theology, is a kind of *pleroma*, the visible appearance of God.¹⁴

What is the source of this midrashic claim? The midrash is a reading of Ps. 114:

¹When Israel went out from Egypt; the house of Jacob from a foreign nation.

²Judah became His holy one; Israel His dominion.

³The Sea saw and fled; the Jordan turned back.

⁴The mountains danced like rams; the hills like lambs.

⁵What has happened to you, O Sea, that you flee; O Jordan that you turn back?

⁶O mountains, that you dance like rams; O hills, like lambs?

⁷From before the Master, tremble Earth, from before the God of Jacob.

The psalm itself is generally taken as a *prosopopeia*, a rendering in visual terms of that which cannot be seen. As read by Sir Philip Sidney, the personifications of nature in this psalm are a figure, an *enargeia*, of the God who cannot be seen by eyes of flesh:

13. See Daniel Boyarin, "The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho)dynamics of Intertextuality," *Poetics Today* 10 (Winter 1989): 661-77.

14. See, for example, Exod. 18, Num. 14:10, and especially 1 Sam. 4:21 for the actual physical reality of the "Glory."

"[David's] handling his prophecy . . . is merely poetical. For what else [are] . . . his notable *prosopopeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in his majesty, his telling of the Beasts' joyfulness and hills' leaping, but a heavenly poesy: wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith?"¹⁵

Commenting on this passage in Sidney, Murray Krieger remarks:

The *prosopopeia* is a form of personification which gives a voice to that which does not speak and thereby gives presence to that which is absent. Through this figure, Sidney argues, God enters David's poem (we are made to "see God coming in his majesty"). It is as if this figure is made to serve the larger objective of *enargeia*, the verbal art of forcing us to see vividly. Through "the eyes of the mind"—an appropriately Platonic notion—we are shown the coming of God and his "unspeakable and everlasting beauty." Here, then, are words invoking a visible presence, though of course to "the eyes of the mind" alone. Though God's may be only a figurative entrance through His personified creatures, the poet makes us, "as it were" see this entrance. He is there, in His living creation, and absent no longer.¹⁶

In contrast to Sidney for whom the psalm is the figure of an absence, for the midrash it is read as the record of a presence—not eyes of the mind, stimulated to imagine the presence of God through the depiction of the effect on His creatures, but eyes of flesh saw God in history.¹⁷ The psalm is a poetical rendering of an actual occurrence in which the sea did not want to be split and only the actual revelation of God convinced it to move. It is this event that is remembered in the

15. Quoted in Murray Krieger, "Poetic Presence and Illusion: Renaissance Theory and the Duplicity of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (Summer 1979): 601.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 601–2.

17. In my fuller analysis of this text ("The Sea Resists," p. 670), I have presented arguments against reading the midrash itself as figurative, a reading that would attenuate my use of it here in this discussion. Because of the importance of this point for the present thesis, I will briefly summarize my arguments: (1) There is no internal warrant for reading this text allegorically—no hint or ungrammaticality in it that points to another meaning. The only reason to allegorize would be precisely because of a doctrine that God is incorporeal and invisible and that the sea can have no sentience, but that would be a perfect example of a vicious circle. The very move to allegorize is a Platonic impulse, as I shall suggest below. (2) There are many Rabbinic texts that speak of God's self-revelation at the sea, and *all* of them would have to be allegorized. (3) The Rabbis explicitly and frequently contrast *meshal* as figurative narrative and fiction to the "real" (see my "History Becomes Parable: A Reading of the Midrashic Meshal," *Bucknell Review* [forthcoming]). It follows, then, that since one part of this text is explicitly designated *meshal*, the rest is considered to be "real." While none of these arguments may be deemed incontrovertible alone, their cumulative weight is, in my opinion, nearly unanswerable.

verse of Ps. 77:17 as well, “The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You and were convulsed.” Once God was visible on the sea and to the sea, naturally not only did the sea perceive His Presence, but the whole people did as well:

The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is His name [Exod. 15:3]: Rabbi Yehuda says: Here is a verse made rich in meaning by many passages, (for) it declares that *He revealed Himself to them* with every manner of weapon:

He revealed Himself to them as a warrior girt with his sword, as it is said, “Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O warrior” (Ps. 45:4);

He revealed Himself to them as a cavalry officer, as it is said, “And He rode upon a cherub, and did fly” (Ps. 18:11);

He revealed Himself to them in coat of mail and helmet, as it is said, “And He put on righteousness as a coat of mail” (etc.) (Isa. 59:17);

He revealed Himself to them with a spear, as it is said, “At the shining of Thy glittering spear” (Hab. 3:11), and it says, “Draw out also the spear, and the battle-ax” etc. (Ps. 35:3);

He revealed Himself to them with bow and arrows, as it is said, “Thy bow is made quite bare” etc. (Hab. 3:9), and it says, “And He sent out arrows, and scattered them” etc. (II Sam. 22:15);

He revealed Himself to them in buckler and shield, as it is said, “His truth is a shield and a buckler” etc. (Ps. 91:4), and it says, “Take hold of shield and buckler” etc. (Ps. 35:2).¹⁸

“The Lord is a man of war” is the verse immediately following “This is My God.” It describes, therefore, how God looked to the people when they pointed to Him above the Red Sea. In order to thicken that description, as it were, the midrashist collects all of the verses in the Bible in which God is described as having weapons and the form of a warrior. These are the guises in which He revealed Himself to the sea and to the people Israel at the time of the passage. In concluding this section, I would say that there can be very little doubt that in early Rabbinic Judaism God was understood as a being who could be seen. There was, of course, an absolute taboo on making images of God, but the taboo on seeing God was only relative. Similar to the taboo of approaching the Holy Ark for those who were not fit to do so, violation of the taboo could result in death or injury, but it was nevertheless, even then, possible to see God. Moreover, there were certain circumstances in which God also permitted special people (and even, occasion-

18. Aside from changing Judah to Yehuda, I have cited here Judah Goldin’s excellent and elegant translation of this passage in *The Song at the Sea, Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (New Haven, Conn., 1971), pp. 124–25; my emphasis. On this text, see Stroumsa, “Polymorphie divine et transformations d’un mythologème: l’*Apocryphon de Jean*’ et ses sources,” *Vigilae Christianae* 35 (Dec. 1981): 421.

ally, the entire people) to see Him. In my next section, I will try to show that such occasions as remembered from history and projected as possible futures were a focus of desire on the part of the Rabbis,¹⁹ and, moreover, that the hermeneutic practice of midrash was understood as a means to reachieve such moments of seeing God.

Not only did the Jews see God at the crossing of the Red Sea, but they left a text in which that sight is eloquently described. The text is the Song of Songs, in particular chapter 5 of that book, in which there is a detailed description, a blazon by the maiden of her now hidden and desired lover. In the midrashic reading, which is *not* an allegory (as I shall presently claim), the maiden is Israel and the lover, of course, is God:

Rabbi Eliezer decoded [*patar*] the verse in the hour that Israel stood at the Sea. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep* (Song 2:14), that they were hidden in the hiding place of the Sea—*Show me your visage*; this is what is written. “Stand forth and see the salvation of the Lord” (Exod. 14:13)—*Let me hear your voice*; this is the singing, as it says, “Then Moses sang” (Exod. 15:1)—*For your voice is lovely*; this is the Song—*And your visage is beautiful*; for Israel were pointing with their fingers and saying, “*This is my God and I will beautify Him*” (Exod. 15:2).²⁰

19. See Rowland, “The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature,” p. 153: “The way in which other biblical imagery merges into the production of the various visions may all point to a setting in which a free meditation took place on the chariot-chapter, so that, as in Rev., the visionary’s own experience could make an important contribution to the ‘seeing again’ of Ezekiel’s vision.”

20. *Song of Songs Rabbah*, ed. Shimson Dunsky (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 73; hereafter abbreviated *SSR*. The verse of Exodus, where it says “stand forth,” is tallied with the verse of Song of Songs where the speaker, appealing to his beloved who is hidden, calls to her to come out from hiding and show him her face. The rest follows from this. The last clause requires explanation, however. The word I have translated as “visage” is generally glossed as “countenance.” However, its root is from the verb “to see.” Moreover, it can be understood as a participle of the causitive form of that verb, thus meaning “showing or pointing out.” Rabbi Eliezer accordingly takes it to mean, “And your pointing is beautiful,” that is, when you pointed to Me with your fingers and said in the Song at the Sea, “*This is my God and I will ascribe beauty to Him.*”

Rabbi Akiva interprets the verse of the Song of Songs using the same hermeneutic principles but applies the text to a different context in Exodus, namely the Revelation at Sinai. Not surprisingly, in light of the text cited above, for him, the “seeing” described here refers to the voices:

Rabbi Akiva decoded the verse in the hour that they stood before Mount Sinai. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep* (Song 2:14), for they were hidden in the hiding places of Sinai. *Show me your visage*, as it says, “And all of the People saw the voices” (Exod. 20:14)—*Let me hear your voice*, this is the voice from before the commandments, for it says, “All that you say we will do and we will

The description of His beauty in chapter 5 is then the description of the vision of that beauty that was vouchsafed Israel at the moment of their greatest closeness to the bridegroom, the crossing of the Red Sea. That moment is invested with a great erotic charge by the reading of Song of Songs into it, precisely that erotic charge assigned to ocular desire by St. Augustine.²¹ As expressed by Jay:

A frequent source of hostility to vision has, of course, been the anxiety unleashed by what Augustine called “ocular desire” in the more ascetic, anti-hedonist critics of idolatry. What they have recognized is that desire is a source of restless dissatisfaction, preventing humans from contentment with their lot. As such, it provides a stimulus to living in an imagined future or perhaps returning to a lamented past. That is, it has a deeply temporalizing function. [“RH,” p. 311]

But this is precisely the point of the midrash. There *was* an experience of unmediated vision of God, and it has unleashed a desire to live in an imagined future or return to a lamented past.

Another midrashic text renders the experience of that vision and the poignancy of its desired return exquisitely:²²

This is My God, and I will beautify Him (Exod. 15:2). . . . Rabbi Akiva says: Before all the Nations of the World I shall hold forth on the beauties and splendor of Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be! For, lo, the Nations of the World keep asking Israel, “What is thy Beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?” (Song 5:9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, we have loved you unto death [*ad mwt*] “for thus do the maidens [*almwt*] love Thee” (Song 1:3)—and it is said, “for Your sake we have been killed all the day” (Ps. 44:23). “You are beautiful, you are heroes, come merge with us!”

But Israel replies to the Nations of the World: Do you know Him? Let us tell you a little of His Glory:²³ “My beloved is white and ruddy, braver than ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his

hear” (Exod. 24:7)—*For your voice is pleasant*; this is the voice after the commandments, as it says, “God has heard the voice of your speaking; this which you have said is goodly” (Deut. 5:25). [*SSR*, p. 73]

21. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. M. Blaiklock (Nashville, Tenn., 1983), bk. 10, ch. 35, pp. 274–77.

22. For a fuller reading of this passage and in particular its problematic connection with martyrdom and history, see Boyarin, “Language Incribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings”: Midrash and Martyrdom,” *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 139–51. Some of my discussion here is repeated verbatim from that essay.

23. See above note 14. Note that God’s beauty is not unspeakable (contra Sidney) but merely inexhaustible.

hair is curls as black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by springs of water. . . . His cheeks are like perfumed gardens. . . . His palate is sweetmeats and He is all delight; *This* is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (Song 5:10ff.). [*M*, 2:25–26]

A complex set of intertextual connections and echoes sets up the motions of desire in this text. The most important is the connection between Exodus and the Song of Songs. According to the earliest strata of Rabbinic hermeneutics, the Song of Songs was *not* an allegory in the sense of paradigms projected onto the syntagmatic axis or concrete entities and events that signify abstractions. Rather it was an actual love dialogue spoken by God to Israel and Israel to God in concrete historical circumstances, or written by Solomon, as if spoken by Israel and God in those circumstances.²⁴ The circumstances themselves were a subject of some controversy. Some of the early Rabbis held that the Song had first been pronounced at the crossing of the sea, while others held that it was first delivered at the revelation at Mount Sinai. That is, both positions maintain that the *Song of Songs* is the description of Israel's experience of seeing God at one of the highpoints of the Salvation History. This is, of course, especially the case for the verses of Song 5:10–19, which are a detailed and desiring description of the male beloved by the female lover, that is, of God by Israel.

Rabbi Akiva's midrash belongs obviously to the tradition that the Song of Songs was sung at the Red Sea, an expansion, as it were, of the Song at the Sea itself. The midrash represents the relationship of God and the Jewish people as an erotic one—through the reading of Song of Songs into Exodus. However, Thanatos also introduces itself into this erotic idyll, both formally and thematically.

For, lo, the Nations of the World keep asking Israel, "What is thy Beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?" (Song 5:9), that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, we have loved you unto death [*'ad mwt*], "for thus do the maidens [*'almwt*] love Thee" (Song 1:3)—and it is said, "for Your sake we have been killed all the day" (Ps. 44:23).

The midrash here cries out at the necessary "intertwining of death and desire" ("RH," p. 318), but it proposes a response to that cry as well. The answer that the text proposes for the terrible irony of Eros that leads to death is that the experience of seeing God was so wonderful

24. For a discussion of these two possibilities, see Saul Lieberman, "The Teaching of the Song of Songs" [Hebrew], in *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, ed. Gershom G. Scholem, 2d ed. (New York, 1965), pp. 118–26, and Boyarin, "Two Introductions to the Midrash on the *Song of Songs*" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz: A Quarterly for Jewish Studies* 56 (July–Sept. 1987): 479–500.

that the Jews are willing to suffer and even to be killed if only there is a promise that through this action they will be restored (individually or nationally) to the state in which they could see God in His beauty.²⁵ The Rabbis do not valorize an end to ocular desire but rather seek its fulfillment. A fuller reading of the text will help us to fathom this desire.

Midrash often signifies by allusion to other biblical passages. These allusions are discovered by observing the ungrammaticalities of the midrashic text, that is, linguistic forms that either do not quite fit their context or belong to another linguistic stratum. While the phrase *'al mwt* could mean "until death" in Rabbinic Hebrew, its grammar is sufficiently unusual to call attention to itself; the normal form would be *'ad mwt*, as the midrash indeed glosses it. I would read this nearly ungrammatical form as an intertextual clue. The only place in the Hebrew Bible where *'al mwt* occurs in the sense of "until death" is in Ps. 48:15: "this is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us until death." Moreover, this verse begins with language strongly reminiscent of the very verse that Rabbi Akiva's midrash is reading, "this is God."

This verse is also (according to Rabbinic hermeneutics) a record of a theophany, again because of the deictic "this." Rabbis of a period only slightly later than Rabbi Akiva animate the rich ambiguity of the Psalms verse by reading "until death" as "maidens," in precisely the reverse move of Rabbi Akiva's reading of "maidens" as "death" in the Song of Songs verse:

Rabbis Berechia and Helbo and Ula and Rabbi El'azar in the name of Rabbi Hanina have said: In the future God will lead the dance of

25. It is fascinating to see how this motif is transformed in the later mystical literature. Compare the following discussion by Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," pp. 129–30:

we know that the dangers facing the mystic in the ascent to the Merkabah form a substantial and pervasive theme in the Heikalot literature. The dangers are often said to intensify as one approaches the throne of God, and so it seems likely that they would culminate with the vision of God Himself. Yet these dangers do not make it impossible to see God. On the contrary, since the dangers are the price one must pay for the ultimate vision of God, their existence in fact confirms that such a vision is possible. I think, then, that the text is saying that no creature can see God under ordinary circumstances, but if an individual is willing to accept these terrifying dangers then he may in fact see God.

The cultural continuity of this theme from the Bible through the Rabbis and up until this early medieval tradition is impressive. "This passage seems to imply that death, or at least the risk of death, is the price one must pay to obtain a vision of God" (Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," p. 131). See also Susan Niditch, "Merits, Martyrs, and 'Your Life as Booty': An Exegesis of *Mekilta, Pisha 1*," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 13 (Dec. 1982): 166: "self-sacrifice, willingness to die, is seen as related to the problem of God's continuing contact with Israel in a time of broken myths."

the righteous . . . and they will point to Him with their fingers, as it says, "*this* is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us until death [*'al mut*]" as maidens [*k'alamot*], in the dances of the righteous. [SSR, p. 152]

It seems to me not too much to suggest, therefore, that Rabbi Akiva's midrashic transformation of "maidens" into "until death" alludes to this very verse, in which *death* is transformed into *maidens* by the later midrash.

Now it is very important to note that Ps. 48 is itself a meditation on history. The psalmist, speaking at some indefinite time, recalls the distant past of the splitting of the sea in a series of blatant allusions to Exod. 15, the same text Rabbi Akiva is interpreting.²⁶ The psalmist declares, "as we have heard, so have we seen," citing the very transformation of history into present experience that Rabbi Akiva enacts by his transformation of anaphora into deixis. The transformation in both cases is enacted precisely via a hermeneutic act: in the case of the psalm by connecting present reality with memory and thus reliving the remembered experience, and in the case of the midrash by reading the Torah in such a way that the experience of presence related becomes available to the reader. Finally, the psalmist draws past and present together with the future with his words, "In order that you tell the last generation: *this* is God, our God, until eternity. He will lead us until death." "This is God," God who is present, God whom we will again be able to see and point to:

Said the Holy Blessed One, in this world they were perishing, because they saw My Glory, for it says, "No person may see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20), but in the next world, when I will return My Presence to Zion, I will be revealed in all My Glory to Israel and they will see Me and live forever, for it says "Eye to eye will they see" (Is. 52:8), and not only that but they will point out my Glory one to the other with the finger, and say, "*this* is God, our God," [our verse of psalms] and it says, "On that day, behold *this* is Our God Whom we have hoped for, *this* is the Lord for Whom we have waited" (Is. 25:10).²⁷

The psalm replicates in its thematics the very interpretation of history that the midrash makes both in its thematics and in its hermeneutic method. For the psalmist, it seems, the promise of God's self-revelation, of seeing Him again, as He was seen at the crossing of the sea, redeems the vicissitudes of history.

26. For this reading, see Robert Alter, "Psalms," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 257.

27. *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. S. Buber, 4 vols. (1885; Jerusalem, 1964), 4:18.

When we combine the midrashic text itself with its biblical subtexts, we can generate a strong reading of it. The interpreter stands in a position of desire. His Torah tells him of a moment of perfection when the people stood in such a marvelous union with God that what a servant saw then, no one has seen since. How can the desire to relive that moment of presence be fulfilled? The distance between the present reader and the absent moment of Presence is the tragedy of history. Rabbi Akiva conquers history by bringing it into the present. For him, as well as for the psalmist, what we have heard is what we have seen, and if death, time, history interfere, they can be conquered through a reading strategy that eradicates them by effacing the difference among past, present, and future. Anaphora becomes deixis. This reading strategy is called midrash, a hermeneutics grounded at least in part on ocular desire, not on the need to reconstruct a message, a signified, but rather to relive an experience, a visual experience of the Presence of God. Here we have figured perfectly the paradoxical time of midrashic reading. The linguistic transformation of anaphora into deixis thematizes the issue of midrash brilliantly. Anaphora is the very figure of absence: this which I am telling you about; this which was in the past; this which is history. Deixis is the very figure of presence: this which I am pointing at; this which you can see. The absent moment of theophany is thus transformed into an evocation of a present moment of vision of God both in the form and in the content (or rather in the indistinguishable form-content) of the midrash. The absent moment of revelation is transformed into a present moment of reading:

*Praise the Lord; call His name; . . . sing to Him; seek out His face forever (Ps. 105:1): Rabbi Yose the son of Halaftha said to Rabbi Ishmael his son: If you wish to see the Face of the Divine Presence in this world, study Torah in the Holy Land.*²⁸

The revision of our understanding of Rabbinic religion I am proposing here has an important correlate in the reading of the Song of Songs. As I have been describing it here, the Song of Songs was read by the Rabbis as an actual love song sung between God and Israel at a concrete historical moment (or alternatively, as a song written later that renders that moment poetically). Many writers on the midrash of the Song of Songs understand it to be an allegorical reading similar in kind to the later Jewish interpretations of the poem as well as the Christian readings. The claim is made, in effect, that the hermeneutic method is the same, only the specific allegorical identifications are different, with

28. *Midrash on Psalms*, ed. Buber (New York, 1947), p. 448. On this source, see further the remarks of Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, 2:96.

God and Israel assuming the roles of the male and female protagonists rather than Christ and the Church. One finds this view expressed in nearly every commentary on or introduction to the Song of Songs.²⁹

However, it seems to me that we must clearly distinguish the midrashic reading of the Song from that of allegorists such as Origen. Aphoristically, we might say that the direction of Origen's reading is from the concrete to the abstract, while the direction of midrash is from the abstract to the concrete. Or, using Jakobsonian terminology, at least heuristically, we could say that allegorical reading involves the projection of the syntagmatic plane (metonymy) of the text onto a paradigmatic plane of meaning while midrash projects paradigms (metaphor) into a syntagmatic plane of narrative history. Thus, while these are seemingly similar strategies of reading (and often genetically connected ones),³⁰ Origen's allegoresis and midrash are really quite different from each other. I would like to add two clarifications at this point. The first is that the category of "allegory," both as a means of text production and as a reading practice, is a notoriously slippery one. Therefore, it should be clear that when I say allegoresis I mean allegorical reading of the Philonic-Origen type, which has a fairly clear structure as well as explicit theoretical underpinnings. The other point that I wish to clarify here is that I am *not* contrasting Jewish with Christian modes of reading. The Gospels themselves, Paul, and even much later Christian literature contain much that is midrashic in hermeneutic structure (more, in my opinion, than is currently recognized, for example, *Piers Plowman*). Moreover, much authentic Jewish hermeneutic is allegorical or otherwise "logocentric" in structure. Nor am I trying to valorize midrash over Alexandrian allegoresis; I wish only to clarify the two modes of reading as different in order to understand midrash better.

Let us consider this difference by examining Origen's reflections on his method. In the third book of his great commentary on the Song of Songs, the Alexandrian father has discussed in detail the theory behind his allegoresis. It is explicitly founded on a Platonic-Pauline theory of correspondence between the *visible* things of this world and the *invisible* things of God.³¹ Origen goes on to say:

29. See, for example, *Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. Marvin H. Pope, vol. 7C of *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), p. 19: "It is clear that [Akiva] must have understood the Song allegorically."

30. See Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Scripta hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 247-75.

31. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, Md., and London, 1957), p. 218; hereafter abbreviated SS. See also Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 63.

So, as we said at the beginning, all the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to those that are hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly things to heavenly.

But this relationship does not obtain only with creatures; the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort. Because of certain mystical and hidden things the people is visibly led forth from the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert, where there was a biting serpent, and a scorpion, and thirst, and where all the other happenings took place that are recorded. All these events, as we have said, have the aspects and likenesses of certain hidden things. And you will find this correspondence not only in the Old Testament Scriptures, but also in the actions of Our Lord and Saviour that are related in the Gospels.

If, therefore, in accordance with the principles that we have now established all things that are in the open stand in some sort of relation to others that are hidden, it undoubtedly follows that the visible hart and roe mentioned in the Song of Songs are related to some patterns of incorporeal realities, in accordance with the character borne by their bodily nature. And this must be in such wise that we ought to be able to furnish a fitting interpretation of what is said about the Lord perfecting the harts, by reference to those harts that are unseen and hidden. [SS, p. 223]

Origen's text describes a perfect correspondence between the ontology of the world and that of the text. In both there is an outer shell and an inner meaning. We see accordingly the metaphysical grounding of the allegorical method used by Origen, and indeed by Philo as well.³² In order for the Scripture to have an "inner meaning," there must be an ontological structure that allows for inner meaning. Allegoresis is thus explicitly founded in a Platonic universe. This Platonic universe is exactly the one in which God is incorporeal, cannot be seen with eyes of flesh, and can only be rendered in language by figures that make Him seem visible to the "eyes of the mind." In that ontotheology, in order for God to become visible to man He must be transformed, incarnated in flesh. The text, too, is an incarnation in visible language of the invisible things of the world. As R. P. Lawson has pointed out, "If the Logos

32. Whitman writes that it is "Origen who first conceives of the different kinds of interpretation as a simultaneous tripartite 'depth' within a given passage, rather than simply alternate strategies for various passages" (Whitman, *Allegory*, p. 63). It may be that Origen first articulated such a theory explicitly, but surely Philo denied the literal sense of neither the historical nor legal passages of the Pentateuch while at the same time giving them an allegorical reading.

in His Incarnation is God-Man, so, too, in the mind of Origen the incarnation of the Pneuma in Holy Scripture is divine-human" (SS, p. 9). Hermeneutics, then, in this tradition, is an attempt to get behind the visible text to its invisible meaning.

In Rabbinic religion, on the other hand, as we have seen, there is no invisible God manifested in an Incarnation. God Himself is visible (and therefore, corporeal); language is also not divided into a carnal and a spiritual being. Accordingly, there can be no allegory. As we have seen, when the Rabbis read the Song of Songs, they do not translate its "carnal" meaning into one or more "spiritual" senses; rather, they establish a concrete, historical moment in which to contextualize it. If the impulse of Origen is to spiritualize and allegorize physical love quite out of existence in the allegorical reading of the Song, the move of the midrash is to understand the love of God and Israel as an exquisite version of precisely that human erotic love.³³ Reading the Song of Songs as a love dialogue between God and Israel is then no more allegorical than reading it as a love dialogue between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Song is not connected with an invisible meaning but with the text of the Torah and thus with concrete moments of historical memory.

Meaning does not always show itself, just as God does not always show Himself, and, indeed, there are circumstances in which it is dangerous to see meaning just as it is dangerous to see God, but both God and meaning are in principle visible. Hermeneutics is a practice of the recovery of vision. That is, it is ideally a practice in which the original moments of the unmediated vision of God's presence can be recovered. We find this model of hermeneutics explicitly thematized in the following story from the midrash on the Song of Songs:

Ben-Azzai was sitting and interpreting [making midrash], and fire was all around him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, "Rabbi, Ben-Azzai is sitting and interpreting, and fire is burning all around him." He went to him and said to him, "I heard that you were interpreting, and the fire burning all around you." He said, "Indeed." He said, "Perhaps you were engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot [theosophical speculation]." He said, "*No. I was sitting and stringing the words of Torah [to each other], and the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as radiant / joyful as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as sweet as at their original*

33. For Origen's views on the body and sexuality, see Peter Brown, "I Beseech You: Be Transformed': Origen," *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), pp. 160-77. Denigration of the human body and the body of language are correlated with each other and with the doctrine of the incorporeality of God in Jewish religious history as well. When Judaism accepts the Platonic ontotheology, its reading practices become virtually identical to those of Origen and only the applications differ.

giving. Were they not originally given in fire, as it is written, ‘And the mountain was burning with fire’ (Deut. 4:11)?” [SSR, p. 42]

In this text, allusions to the Song of Songs are deployed very skillfully in order to describe the experience of midrashic reading. The Rabbi was interpreting the Torah in accordance with the methods of midrash. While doing this, he and the listeners had a visual experience indicating communion with God. Rabbi Akiva becomes suspicious that perhaps his colleague was engaging in forbidden or dangerous theosophical speculation and comes to investigate. He phrases his investigative question in the language of Song of Songs 1:4, “The King brought me into His chambers,” the verse that gave rise to the mystical practice known as “being engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot.” But Ben-Azzai answers that it was not that verse, that is, not a verse and practice that relate to mystical speculation, that brought him into communion with God but rather the application of another verse of the same Song, “Your cheeks are lovely with jewels, your neck with beads” (Song 1:10). The word for beads means that which is strung together into chains. Ben-Azzai’s “defense” accordingly is that he was engaged in precisely the same activity as that exemplified by Rabbi Akiva’s midrash above—linking “words of the Torah to words of the Holy Writings” as Rabbi Akiva linked the words of Exodus to the words of the Song of Songs. In order to recover the erotic visual communion that obtained between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, Ben-Azzai engages not in a mystical practice but in a hermeneutic one, the practice of midrash. The essential moment of midrash is the stringing together of parts of the language of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings, forming new linguistic strings out of the old, and thereby recovering the original moment of Revelation itself. This practice is accompanied by the visual experience also beheld at the giving of the Torah and particularly by the appearance of fire. This will be then a hermeneutics of recollected experience and visual perception. It seems that even in that very culture which is simply assumed to worship “an invisible, non-theophanous God,” “the age-old battle between the eye and the ear is far from being decided one way or the other” (“RH,” pp. 308, 323).