

## Holy Ground (*'Admat Qodesh*): A Counter-Locative Claim on Sacred Space at the Burning Bush\*

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The site of revelation at the burning bush is called *the* Mountain of God (Exod 3:1). Yet this “elementary hierophany—the manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object,” to borrow Eliade’s language, does not mark a permanent conduit between Heaven and Earth as sacred center or axis mundi.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the place is merely sacred for a moment foreshadowing the giving of the Law at Sinai at that same locus later in Exodus. It then disappears altogether except in the collective memory of the people, never to become a permanent holy site or destination for pilgrimage. In fact, Bible scholars contest its precise geographical location.<sup>2</sup> Is it the site of Jebel Musa, where the Christian

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monastery stands today in the Sinai Peninsula,<sup>3</sup> or is it closer to Midianite territory in the Gulf of Aqaba, perhaps Jebel al Lawz, where Moses herded his father-in-law's flocks?<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the altar at Mount Moriah upon which Abraham bound Isaac, marking the Temple Mount (Gen 22:2, 14; 2 Chron 3:1), and the stone monument marking Jacob's night vision at Bethel (Gen 28:17), which would become the site of Jeroboam's Temple (2 Kgs 12:32-33), Sinai as a locus of theophany is ephemeral. It exists merely within the imaginative realm, in what Henri Lefebvre identifies as "conceived space (*l'espace conçu*)," or mental space, the equivalent of Soja's "Secondspace."<sup>5</sup> As opposed to Firstspace—the practical concern (*pratique spatiale*) of architects, engineers, geologists, and urban planners—this terrain is wholly ideological and conceptual, concerned with language and metaphor, with representation and visualization by way of drawings and maps. It is concerned with what is understood and intended by the people who would construct or, in this case, imagine Moses' encounter with the divine in *that* locus.

In this paper, I excavate the ideological groundswell beneath this place. I am particularly fascinated with sacred places that cannot be fixed in space or that mark a "wobbling pivot" (J. Z. Smith's term).<sup>6</sup> That is, this locus is not identified as the permanent abode of the deity, the conduit between Heaven and Earth at the navel of the earth as in Ancient Near Eastern Temples—characteristic of what Smith calls a "locative" religious notion of sacred place. Rather, the site of the burning bush conveys a counter-locative, or "utopian" theology of place, from *u-topos*, meaning "any" or "no place."<sup>7</sup> Though not fixed permanently, the burning bush marks and foreshadows the Revelation at that same mountain, and symbolically anticipates the Tabernacle (Mishkan), the itinerant Temple

that traveled with the Israelites through the wilderness. The details surrounding this vision—names, place of encounter, and mode of revelation—all prefigure the giving of the Law at Sinai and the ongoing access to the Divine Presence through the Tabernacle. I read these biblical texts synchronically, through a deep-structural and intertextual lens akin to rabbinic midrash.<sup>8</sup> In the end, however, this analysis raises questions about chronology—issues of textual sources (E, J, P, and D) and the historical context of their composition and final redaction. I speculate as to whether there is a progression to these scenes of theophany intended by the final redaction—burning bush, Sinai, Tabernacle—and whether their composition may be prior to the establishment of the First-Temple or post-exilic. Given the scope of the paper, these questions remain unresolved, yet point to the ideological underpinnings percolating below the surface of the sacred locus of Revelation.

#### *Theophany in the Desert: An Unmarked Place*

God first reveals God's self to Moses as he is herding Jethro's flocks "beyond the wilderness [*aḥar ha-midbar*]," and comes upon the "Mountain of God" at Horeb (Exod 3:1, NRSV).<sup>9</sup> The identification of the place as God's mountain anticipates the locus of the Revelation at Sinai (Exod 19:11, 18, 20, 23; 24:26). Called the "mountain of God [*har ha-elohim*]" in only three other contexts (Exod 4:27, 24:13 and 2 Kgs 19:8),<sup>10</sup> the narrator designates it as such here, not because God dwells on it," according to Sara Japhet, "but because he may reveal himself there (as in Judg 5:4-5, Deut 32:2, Ps 68:8-9). It is the revelation that makes the mountain sacred; hence it is an *ad hoc* rather than a permanent sanctity."<sup>11</sup> This claim requires elaboration. That is, the Mountain of God *could* have become permanent rather than

*ad hoc*. What makes the pivot “wobble,” so to speak, is determined by divine fiat in the moment, rather than by earlier or later layers of human accretions? And what are the theological implications of this site’s ephemeral character? The temporary nature of this sacred place is intrinsically related to the choice of wilderness as a site of theophany. The place where God “sustained him [the people, Israel] in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye” (Deut 32:10). The region, *midbar Sinai*,<sup>12</sup> is significant as a place literally of no-man’s land, beyond civilization, where the divine appears at a site absent of historical layers, a place that would cast no future shadows.<sup>13</sup> In Jeremiah’s language, God led the Israelites as a bride through the wilderness, in a “land unsown [*’eret z l’o zeru’ah*]” (Jer 2:2), where they would be wholly dependent on divine providence—where bread rained from heaven, quail swept in from the sea, and water sprung from rock, where “the clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years” (Deut 8:4). As Jon Levenson points out, “the desert...as the locale of YHWH’s mountain home, functions in early prose as a symbol of freedom, which stands in opposition to the massive and burdensome regime of Egypt, where state and cult are presented as colluding in the perpetuation of slavery and degradation.”<sup>14</sup>

The imagery in this first theophany amplifies the supernatural yet temporary nature of the place. In contrast to Abraham’s altar (Gen 22:14) and Jacob’s stone monument (28:18, 22), no permanent artifact—human or natural—is laid here to which the prophet might return and know *this place* to be the Mountain of God. The loci of the Binding of Isaac and Jacob’s night vision—Mount Moriah and Bethel respectively—are both identified as *the place [ha-maqom]* of theophany: Abraham sees “*the place [ha-maqom]*” from

afar (Gen 22:3-4); Jacob is arrested at that place by the setting sun: “And he encountered/struck upon *the* place [*va-yifg ‘a ba-maqom*]” (Gen 28:11).<sup>15</sup> While the Hebrew expression “the place [*ha-maqom*]” is used in the context of Moses’ first encounter with God—“the place [*ha-maqom*] on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exod 3:5)—it does not signify a *particular* place, as in the Binding of Isaac at Moriah and Jacob’s dream vision at Bethel. Further, both patriarchal sites are linked to an etiology: Moriah—the seeing/providing [*r. ‘h.*] or fear/awe [*y.r. ‘.*] of God (Gen 22:14; cf. vv. 8, 12), and Bethel, “the House of God [*beit ‘Elohim*]” (28:17-19).<sup>16</sup> There is no etiological story attached to this place. Rather it is named from the outset “the mountain of God [*har ha-elohim*]” at Horeb (Exod 3:1).<sup>17</sup> Both Abraham and Jacob set up an altar or stone monument (Gen 12 and 28:18-22)—human artifacts that permanently mark the spot. By contrast, at the burning bush, God appears in a common bush or blackberry bramble (*rubus sanctus*),<sup>18</sup> as an angel or messenger [*mal’akh*], a manifestation of the divine in the form of fire. Yet “the bush was not consumed [*ha-seneh ‘eineinu ‘ukal*]”—and the fire continued to burn (v. 2). Both bush and fire wither and die, in contrast to stone—the ancient material of altar, memorial, and grave marker.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Burning Bush foreshadows Sinai and Mishkan*

The burning bush itself is ephemeral and reaches beyond itself as signifier and metaphor. The Hebrew term for bush, *seneh*, is a near *hapax legomenon*, and appears again only once in the context of Moses’ swansong as *shokni seneh*, an epithet for God—“dweller in the bush” (Deut 33:16).<sup>20</sup> The verb, “to dwell [*sh.k.n.*],” resonates with the command and promise: “Let them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell

among them [*'assu li miqdash ve-shakhanti be-tokham*]" (Exod 25:8). Many scholars have noted the near homonym between *seneh* and Sinai. At this very site, God would appear atop the mountain in the form of fire upon the giving of the Law (Exod 19:1, 16-18). In Deuteronomy, the mountain is described as "burning to the heart of the Heavens [*ha-har bo'er 'ad lev ha-shamayim*]" (Deut 4:11)—echoing the medium of theophany here in "the heart of fire/flame of fire [*labat ha-'esh*]" and the bush that "burns [*bo'er*]" (Exod 3:2). Because of its luminescence and seemingly formless non-material quality, fire often serves as the mode of divine manifestation (identified with the *Kevod YHWH*—the "Glory" or "Presence" of the Eternal).<sup>21</sup> After the ratification of the covenant, just as Moses is about to ascend the mountain for forty days and forty nights, and the Presence of the LORD [*Kevod YHWH*] appears *like* a consuming fire "*ke'esh okhelet*" and yet when the prophet enters the cloud, like the bush itself, he is not consumed (24:17-18). Chimerical, God can appear either in the form of a glowing fire or diaphanous cloud. When the Mishkan is finally set up, the Presence of the LORD [*Kevod YHWH*] fills the sanctuary in the form of a cloud and initially Moses is excluded from entering (40:34-35), just as he is warned against encroaching on sacred ground at the scene of the burning bush (3:5). Once the Mishkan is set up, God would continue to lead the people, hovering over the camp as a cloud-by-day and fire-by-night (Exod 40:36-37; Num 9:15-23), in Benjamin Sommer's words, as an "unceasing and ever-accessible theophany."<sup>22</sup>

While a bush fire in the heat of the desert might be common enough, the fact that it does not burn *up* prompts Moses to turn, or turn aside [*sur*], off the path and towards the bush, to see what is *behind* this unusual site (v. 3). An attention grabber, a signifier for the divine, or a metaphor for

the Israelites' suffering and survival through the Egyptian servitude,<sup>23</sup> the burning bush exceeds its bounds.

### *The Warning*

God then calls, or rather alerts him: “Moshe, Moshe” (v. 4). Like the call to Abraham at the *'Aqedah* (Gen 22:11), or Jacob before his descent to Egypt (46:2), the man must be jolted out of the mundane by a double calling of his name. God warns him not to approach closer:

Then he said, “Come no closer [*'al tiqrav halom*]! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground [*shal na'alekha me'al raglekha ki ha-maqom 'asher 'atah 'omed 'alav 'admat qodesh hu*]” (Exod 3:5).

The warning “Come no closer [*'al tiqrav halom*]”<sup>24</sup> is meant to stop him in his tracks, to prevent Moses from swerving too close, for contact with the deity entails danger. Similarly at Sinai, bounds are placed around the camp and the people are warned not to approach lest God break out against them (Exod 19:12-13, 21-24). For six days, “the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” (Exod 24:17); only on the seventh day is Moses called (v. 16), ascending the mountain and entering the cloud where he will remain for 40 days and 40 nights (v. 18). Likewise, after seven days of preparation, the Mishkan is consecrated on the eighth day, when “fire came out from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces” (Lev 9:24). Just as the bush is bounded by a warning,

encroachment on the Mountain and the Mishkan bodes danger, so they become boundaried in time and space.

The identification of this place as *'admat qodesh*, holy ground, is a prefiguration of the limits placed upon encroaching upon the holy mountain to “gaze” at God (Exod 19:21). Only after the ratification of the covenant, do Moses, Aaron, his sons (only Nadab and Abihu here) and the 70 elders climb the mountain to “see the God of Israel” (24:10). This vision anticipates the moment of revelation of God at the consecration of the Mishkan when *fire goes out from the Presence of the LORD* (that is from the Holy of Holies) to consume the offering (Lev 9:23-24). Yet, as a consequence of offering “strange fire [*'esh zarah*]”—bringing the incense offering not commanded at *that* time in *that* place—Nadab and Abihu are caught in the cross-fire and incinerated (Lev. 10:1-2).<sup>25</sup> The priest is thereafter warned not to approach the Holy of Holies at any time lest he die (Lev 16:1-2).<sup>26</sup> As Benjamin Sommer points out, invoking the theologian Otto Rudolf: “Fire in the tabernacle's dedication ceremony not only serves as a token of divine presence but as a reminder of divine unpredictability; in this divine fire the *fascinans* that attracts humans is brutally tempered with *mysterium* and *tremendum*.”<sup>27</sup> The term *qodesh* here connotes that which is set apart, fraught with danger, highly charged. Inaccessible.<sup>28</sup>

### *Barefoot on Holy Ground*

God then commands Moses to remove his sandals because this place is holy ground [*'admat qodesh h'u*]. What does this act of stripping the sandal [*shlfna 'al*] signify? Why must Moses be barefoot? And why the term *ground* (*'adamah*) rather than “the land” or “the place” (*ha-'aretz* or *ha-maqom*)?

The command is repeated (almost verbatim) near Jericho, when an emissary of God appears to Joshua with sword drawn. He adjures the general: “Remove your sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy [*qodesh*]” (Josh 5:15).<sup>29</sup> In this context, it is not clear what the purpose of the revelation might be. This place near Jericho does not signify a future revelation. The inverse, in fact; Joshua invokes an oath, presumably of his own initiative, that Jericho may never be rebuilt (Josh 6:27).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the place declared “holy ground” to Moses signifies “the one-time nature” of God’s descent on Sinai (Exod 19:11, 18). This is precisely the retroactive view in Deuteronomy: “Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived?” (Deut 4:32-33). Only Moses, in the singular, and Israel, in the collective, have heard the voice speaking out of fire *at this place*, never to be revisited once they move forward from Sinai. “Likewise,” as Christine Palmer points out, “Jericho is wholly dedicated to God and put under the ban (Josh 6:17-19). Moses and Joshua remove their sandals in the context of the exercise of a divine claim. In so doing, they acknowledge both YHWH’s dominion and their role as his servants.”<sup>31</sup>

The act of removing his shoes is also suggestive of the *ḥalitzah* ritual, the “unbinding of the shoe”, by which the levir is released from his commitment to conceive by the wife of his deceased brother who never bore him an heir (Deut 25:9). In the book of Ruth, this law is most likely behind the ceremony that Mr. So-and-So (Pelson Almoni) must undergo in dissociating himself from redeeming Naomi’s land at his own request, lest he “corrupt” his estate by marrying the Moabite woman (Ruth 4:6-9). That is, the loosening/removal of the shoe in *ḥalitzah* entails release

from any claim to inherit or redeem the land of the brother or next of kin. The Hittite legal documents (from Nuzi, a Hurrian city of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium), are suggestive. In a land sale, the transfer of deed is confirmed by lifting up or placing one's foot on the territory. The prior owner would lift his foot off the land, and the new owner or heir would lay claim to it by stamping his foot down, asserting his right to the fields and/or house(s) (SMN 2390, 2338). "Lifting the foot off the property is a symbolic act of relinquishment."<sup>32</sup> The lifting of the foot suggests what the baring of the foot symbolizes: release of any a claim to the land. Likewise, the priests and Levites, who are ultimately disenfranchised from the land of Israel, serve barefoot in the Sanctuary and Temple,<sup>33</sup> just as Moses is commanded to strip off his sandal. This act foreshadows that he (and all Levites) will become servants to God—a landless, non-agrarian elite. Moses' sacred act of acknowledging "holy ground" is yet another way of saying: no man may lay claim to this place (Sinai), adumbrating not only the levitical and priestly service but also the presence of God in the peripatetic sanctuary. Both Moses and God relinquish their claim to this place as a holding in perpetuity.

#### *The Elusive Presence and the Name*

While Moses may or may not remove his shoes,<sup>34</sup> he certainly hides his face in response to the divine command, prescient of God's occluded revelation in the cleft of the rock (33:12-23).<sup>35</sup> In this later theophany, after the sin of the Golden Calf at "Mount Sinai" (34:2, 4), Moses makes an audacious request: "show me your glory, I pray [*har'eini n'a 'et kvodekha*]" (33:18 NRSV), presumably as a sign of reconciliation with the people. God answers: "you cannot see my face [*panai*]; for no one shall see Me and live" (v.

20), yet concedes to reveal the Divine Presence indirectly to Moses. The prophet is placed in the cleft of a rock, and God's palm is placed over the opening. Only in the wake of passing over, would Moses glimpse the trace [*ahor*], but not the face [*panim*] of the divine (v. 23). Simultaneously, the so-called "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" are recited—though it is ambiguous as to who does the verbal calling, God or Moses (34:5-7). While in the scene at the burning bush, it is Moses that covers his own face (*va-yaster Moshe panav*, 3:6), in the cleft of the rock, God covers the prophet with the divine palm, thereby hiding the Presence [*Kavod*] or face [*panim*] from Moses. It seems on the brink of seeing the divine, the human shies away; yet when the prophet expresses the desire to "see" or "behold" God, divinity is elusive. This game of hide-and-seek between prophet and deity reverberates beyond the relationship between Moses and God into later prophetic and Hassidic discourse.

The same ambiguous gesture of disclosure/occlusion is reinforced by the revelation of the mysterious name at the burning bush. After being apprised of his mission, the future redeemer asks: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exod 3:13). The answer is strangely and infamously equivocal: "'Ehyeh 'asher 'Ehyeh...'", tell them, "'Ehyeh has sent me to you" (v. 14). So much ink has been spilled over this divine name, and yet I dare enter the fray.<sup>36</sup> The letters of the Hebrew word, "'ehyeh" (derived from the root, "to be/become", *h-v-h*), form mostly open vowel sounds like breath on the exhale. The meaning of the name ("I-am-that-I-am" or "I-will-be-what-I-will be"), is replicated in the tetragrammaton, *y-h-v-h* ("the LORD" or YHWH), which is the third person imperfect form of the same verb. So, God's second statement follows: "Say this to

the people of Israel: ‘YHWH, the God of your fathers...has sent me to you’ (v. 15). The ineffable name is emblematic of the elusive Presence itself. In Martin Buber’s reading, the twofold *’ehyeh* suggests

...happening, coming into being, being there, being present, being thus and thus; but not being in an abstract sense...God promises to be present with those chosen by him, to remain present with them, to assist them<sup>37</sup>...[yet] He who promises his steady presence, his steady assistance, refuses to restrict himself to definite forms of manifestation; how could the people even venture to conjure and limit him.<sup>38</sup>

Later, God will assure Moses that He shall be present [*’ehyeh*] with him (3:12), and will be [*’ehyeh*] in his mouth and teach him what to say (4:12). The meaning of God’s ineffable name is all about the Presence being *for* or *with* the (human) other; while, at the same time, refusing to be invoked at will or conjured. Jon Levenson enhances this idea, while emphasizing the spatial or geographical delineation associated with the elusive name. Moses demands that Pharaoh release the Israelites that they might worship their God in the desert (5:3), because “the deity is like his worshippers: mobile, rootless and unpredictable. “I shall be *where* I shall be” (3:14)—nothing more definite can be said. This is a God who is free, unconfined by the boundaries that man erects.”<sup>39</sup> The Mishkan, as the wandering pivot, is the quintessential holder of this unconfined deity, the elusive God of *being-with* or *becoming*.

*The Mishkan as Portable Sinai*

The very architecture of the Mishkan reinforces the hide-and-see nature of the Divine Presence. The portable sanctuary serves as a means by which the Israelites might take the commanding Presence at Sinai with them.<sup>40</sup> Following the Revelation at Sinai, they must aspire to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6) through upholding the Law so that God might dwell in their midst (25:8).<sup>41</sup> As Umberto Cassuto so eloquently penned:

The nexus between Israel and the Tabernacle is a perpetual extension of the bond that was forged at Sinai between the people and their God. The children of Israel, dwelling in tribal order at every encampment are able to see, from every side, the Tabernacle standing in the midst of the camp, and the visible presence of the Sanctuary proves to them that just as the glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, so He dwells in their midst wherever they wander in the wilderness. This is the purport of Scripture (xxv 8), when it states: ‘And let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.’ This is also the significance of the clear parallelism between the last sentences of the preceding section, describing how the Divine Presence dwelt upon Mount Sinai [Exod. 24:15-18], and the closing passage of our Book, which depicts, in like terms, how the Divine Presence abode in the Tabernacle [40:34-35]...the very design of the Tabernacle was able to inspire the people with the confident feeling that the Lord was present in their midst.<sup>42</sup>

With the establishment of the Mishkan, God transfers the heavenly Presence to earth in the form of fire and cloud.

Ramban, however, qualifies the nature of the manifestation of the *Kavod* (the “Glory” or “Presence”): “The secret of the Tabernacle is that the *Kavod* which rested on Mount Sinai openly (Exod 24:16, 19; Deut 5:21) would now come to dwell (in the Mishkan) in a concealed way.”<sup>43</sup> While the cloud might be visible from the outside, only Moses (and later the High Priest) will have direct access to the Presence, which rests above the ark-cover between the cherubim (Exod 25:22; Num 7:89).<sup>44</sup> This renders a hierarchy to the enclosed space, in what Nehemia Polen identifies as a “series of nested rectangles:” from the outer encampment framed by the tribes’ banners, to the Sanctuary flanked by the Levites who alone cover and carry its furnishings as it is dismantled; to the inner sanctum (*qodesh*), where the altar and menorah lie and the priests (Cohanim) serve; to the inmost sanctum (*qodesh ha-qodashim*) from where Moses is summoned to speak with God.<sup>45</sup>

As a portable Sinai the tripartite division from the Israelite camp, to the Mishkan with its courtyard, to the inmost sanctum, echoes the stratification of the mountain at the ratification of the covenant. Whereas sanctity is conferred vertically, from Heaven to Earth at Sinai, it is translated, in the Mishkan, into horizontal terms of human access. As Mary Douglas points out:

Both Sinai and the Tabernacle evidence a tripartite division. The summit corresponds to the inner sanctum, or Holy of Holies. The second zone, partway up the mountain, is the equivalent of the Tabernacle’s outer sanctum, or Holy Place. The third zone, at the foot of the mountain, is analogous to the outer court. As with the Tabernacle, the three distinct zones of Sinai feature three gradations of

holiness in descending order. Just as Moses alone may ascend to the peak of the mountain, so all but one are barred from the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.<sup>46</sup>

I adapt her table here:<sup>47</sup>

*Mt. Sinai*

Summit or head of the mountain, smoke, like cloud (Exod 19:18), God came down to top, access for Moses only (Exod 19:20-2; cf. 24:2, 18).

Perimeter of dense cloud, access restricted to Moses, Aaron and two sons (Nadab and Abihu), and the seventy elders (24:9-10).

Lower slopes, carefully bounded (19:21-23), while the people stand at the base of the mountain (v. 17)

Mt. Sinai consecrated Exod 19:23; 24:9-10.

*Tabernacle*

Holy of Holies, cherubim, ark, and tablets of testimony, enveloped in cloud of incense. Only Moses has access (Exod 15:22; Num 7:89) or the High Priest on Yom ha-Kippurim (Lev 16).

Sanctuary: table of show bread, lampstand, incense altar and smoke of incense; restricted to priests (Cohanim).

Outer court, open access

Tabernacle consecrated Lev 9:23-24.

Sinai, however, as divine revelation *to the collective*, is not to be replicated. When God descends to abide among the Israelites, the vertical alignment flattens along the

horizontal plane and is transformed. At the consecration of the Mishkan, the center is forbidden even to Moses, for once the cloud settles he is excluded from entering the Mishkan (Exod. 40:34) until he is summoned: “The LORD called to Moses [*va-yiqr’a el Moshe*] and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting...” (Lev 1:1; echoing the summons to the mountain 24:16). From the point of initiating the High Priest into office (Lev 9), only the Cohen will enter the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the year, *Yom ha-Kippurim*, and then only when enshrouded by a cloud of incense (Lev 16). Nevertheless, this moveable center becomes repository for the divine voice, speaking between the golden wings of the Cherubim, the semblance of fire, above the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies (Exod. 25:22, Num. 7:89).<sup>48</sup> They take the Presence with them as commanding word, mediated through the prophet.

### *Conclusion*

What happens to sacred space over time? Along the axis of chronology in the Exodus narrative, revelation begins as an effusive spontaneous irruption in the form of a burning bramble—the place identified (perhaps by a later redactor) as God’s Mountain (3:1). To the future redeemer, God reveals the mission: they would return *here* to worship on this very mountain (3:12), and, freed from Egyptian servitude, ultimately move on to settle the Promised Land. Sinai was never meant to be a permanent destination but a way-station for the people to encounter God’s awesome presence as the law giver. They lingered at Sinai just long enough to build a portable sanctuary by which they could take that commanding presence with them. The symbolism around the burning bush reinforces the temporary nature of the sacred place or, rather, “ground” [*’adamat qodesh*] (3:5).

The theophany in the bush that burns but is not consumed suggests a spontaneous but temporary phenomenon; the fire prescient of the fire at the top of Mount Sinai and the flame that would rush out of the Holy of Holies at the consecration of the Mishkan. The choreography of the prophet's movements—he turns aside to see; is warned not to approach; told to strip off his sandals; and then hides his face—all presage moments of invitation and exclusion from encounter with God at the mountain and in the Mishkan.

The question remains: from what perspective is the counter-locative or “locomotive” model theophany written or redacted? Is this an ideal held up by a post-exilic community, after the Babylonian conquest of Judea in 587/6 BCE, romanticizing the peripatetic period of divine revelation when the center no longer holds? Or is it an earlier layer, before the Temple was ever established as the near-exclusive “legitimate” site for worship and pilgrimage? Or perhaps the account of the Mishkan is coterminous with the composition of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, posing a critique of the claim that there could be only one sacred center. These sources challenge the ethos that there is only *one* fixed place where God would choose to affix his name. While acknowledging there is none other besides the Lord (Deut 4:35), the Divine Presence is elusive—ubiquitous yet mobile. As the angels in the architecture paradoxically intone in Isaiah's vision, even as the Temple fills with the Divine Presence: “the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa 6:3, NRSV).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1959), 11, 36-42. In contrast to Eliade, I adopt a situational definition of the sacred (rather than substantial one), where sacredness is inherently impermanent and thus must be added to the object (or in this case, place) again and again by collective human action. See the discussion in Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place—Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987), xliv.

<sup>2</sup> On the disputed location of Horeb/Sinai, see William H. C. Propp, Appendix B, “The Historicity of the Exodus from Egypt,” Exodus 19-40, AB 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 749 (on Horeb) and 752 (Sin/Sinai). He argues that the two place names—Horeb/the Deity’s Mountain (attributed to the E and D source) and Sinai (J and P)—could theoretically be two distinct sites.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion in John Bright, *A History of Israel* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster 1982), 124-25.

<sup>4</sup> Midian was a confederation of tribes living near what is today known as the Gulf of Eilat (or Gulf of Aqaba), the body of water that separates the Sinai from Arabia. See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1985), 21.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of spatial theory, see Jon Berquist, “Introduction: Critical Spatiality and the Uses of Theory,” in *Constructions of Space I—Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, eds. Jon L. Berquist and Claudia V. Camp (New York and London: T & T Clark 2007), 1-12. He draws largely from Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1991) and Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 88-103.

<sup>7</sup> Idem., 101-102. See also Benjamin Sommer, “Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle,” *Biblical Interpretation* 9:1 (2001), 41-63. He introduces yet a third theological conception of sacred space which he calls the “locomotive,” characteristic of a sacred center that moves, as in the Tabernacle.

<sup>8</sup>On inner biblical exegesis see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), and Yair Zakovitch, *Tsevat Bi-tsevat 'asuyah : Mah Ben Midrash Penim-Mikra'i Le-midrash huts-Mikra'i* (צבת בצבת עשויה) (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 2009) [Heb.].

<sup>9</sup>The suffix *-ah* (in "*horevah*"), serves as a locative adverb ("at, on, or towards"). The name "Horeb" of the mountain (attributed primarily to the E and D; while J and P call it Sinai.) appears in Deut 4:10; 4:15; 5:2; 9:8; 18:16; 28:69; cf. 1 Kgs 8:9; Ps 106:19; Mal 4:4; 2 Chron 5:10). The name Horeb also appears in the golden calf incident (Exod 31:18; 32:15; 33:6). Horeb is also mentioned in the accounts of the Israelites wanderings (as in Deut 1:2, 6, 19), and associated with other revelations in the Sinai desert, as in the "rock at Horeb" (Exod 17:1) and the revelation to Elijah in the cave (1 Kgs 19:8). See footnote 2, and the discussion in William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-8*, AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 50-52, 191.

<sup>10</sup>Though we also see references to *har-YHWH*, "the mountain of the LORD", in Num 10:33, and Zion will be referred as "the Mount of the House of the LORD" (Isa 2:2; Micah 7:1).

<sup>11</sup>Sara Japhet, "Some Biblical Concepts of Sacred Place," in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land*, Benjamin Z. Kedar R. J. Zwi Weblowsky (eds) (New York: New York University Press 1998), 55-72 (67).

<sup>12</sup>As in Exod 3:1, 19:2, Num 1:1. See the discussion in Hindy Najman, "Towards a Study of the Uses of the Concept of Wilderness in Ancient Judaism," *DSD* 13:1 (2006), 99-113.

<sup>13</sup>Sinai seems to stand free of prior accretions, in contrast to Bethel (Gen 12:18-22; 35:14-15) and Shechem (12:6; 33:18-20; 48:22 [LXX]), which were most likely sites of Canaanite cultic worship when the patriarchs encountered them, and were later appropriated as alternative and contested sacred sites in biblical and post-biblical history. On Bethel, See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. J. McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 291-292; F. O. Garcia-Treto, "Bethel: The History and Traditions of an Israelite Sanctuary" (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1967); J. Kelso et al., "The Excavation of Bethel (1934-60)," *American Schools of Oriental Research* 39 (1968); Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 28-31, 52-53; and Nahum Sarna, "Bethel (Excursus 22)", in *The JPS Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society 1989), 375-377. On Shechem, see Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Place

of Shechem in the Bible," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 20:1 (1957), 10-19, and G. R. H. Wright, "Shechem and League Shrines," *Vetus Testamentum* 21:5 (1971), 572-603. And for the later claims to Shechem, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, see Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Jonathan Ben-Dov, "An Altar on Mt Ebal or Mt Gerizim: The Torah in the Sectarian Debate," *TheTorah.com* (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/an-altar-on-mt-ebal-or-mt-gerizim-the-torah-in-the-sectarian-debate>.

<sup>14</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> The term *maqom* is key to both scenes – appearing four times in Gen 22:3, 4, 9 and 14, and six times in Gen. 28: verses 11 (3 x), 16, 17, and 19. The association of the 'Aqedah with the temple mount is an intra-biblical midrash, which dates back *at least* to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., with the redaction of the Book of Chronicles, cf. 2 Chron. 3:1. See Isaac Kalimi, "The Land of Moriah, Mount Moriah, and the Site of Solomon's Temple in Biblical Historiography," *HTR* 83:4 (1990), 345-362.

<sup>16</sup> On the etiology of Moriah related to God seeing *yir'ê* (see Gen 22:8), or being seen (*yērā'ê*) see the note in E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1964), 164-64. On the name Bethel, "House of God," (Gen 28:19; yet mentioned earlier in Abram's sojourns, Gen 12:8, 13:3) as associated with the Jeroboam's cultic site (1 Kgs 12:32-33, destroyed by Josiah, 2 Kgs 23:15), see the discussion in Speiser, *Genesis*, 219-20.

<sup>17</sup> It is proleptic, anticipating the Sinai Revelation, rather than etiological. See footnote 8. Scholars argue that this phrase may have been interpolated by a later redaction (the source attributed to E or D). See, for example, M. Noth, *Das zweite Buch Mose* (ATD 5; Göttingen 2nd ed. 1961), 20; G. W. Coats, "Moses in Midian," *JBL* 92 (1973), 6; L. Perlitt, "Sinai und Horeb", in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie; Festschrift W. Zimmerli* (Göttingen 1977), 309; W. H. Schmidt, *Exodus* (BK II/2; Neukirchen 1977), 136-137. Th. Booij, "Mountain and Theophany in the Sinai Narrative," *Biblica* 65:1 (1984), 1-26.

<sup>18</sup> Nahum Sarna comments: "The bush in question has been variously identified as the thorny desert plant *Rubus sanctus* that grows near wadis and in moist soil, and as the *cassia senna* shrub known in Arabic as *sene*" (*The JPS Commentary: Exodus* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society 1991], 12). He cites: J. Feliks, *The Plant World of the Bible* (Hebrew) (Ramat Gan: Massada Press, 1968), 110–

112; M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 140f.

<sup>19</sup> Consider the three sites marked by Jacob with stone monuments (*matzevah*): Bethel (“the House of the LORD”) in Gen 28:18, 22; 31:13; 35:14; *Gal-ed* (lit. “mound of testimony”), marked by Jacob and Laban in Gen 31:45, 51-52; and Bethlehem where Rachel dies and is buried, Gen 35:20; 48:7.

<sup>20</sup> Alternative translations: “that dwelt in the bush” (RSV), “who dwells on Sinai” (NRSV) or “Presence-in-the-bush” (NJPS).

<sup>21</sup> For fire as God’s *modus vivendi* see F. M. Cross Jr. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1973), 166-67. This self-revelation anticipates the theophany at Sinai Exod 19:18 and 24:17, and at the consecration of the Mishkan in Lev 9:23-10:2.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Sommer, “Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 9:1 (2001), 45. He attributes these sources to the later P-source, identified as HS (the Holiness School) by Israel Knohl in *The Sanctuary of Silence—The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press 1995). See also David Frankel, in “Two Priestly Conceptions of Guidance in the Wilderness,” *JSOT* 81 (1998), 31-37. These images reflect a move towards greater democratization of the cult. By contrast, the *Kavod* in the earlier layer of the “Priestly Torah” (PT) abides, for the most part, strictly within the Holy of Holies, and is rarely seen to descend upon the sanctuary or emerge from the sanctuary (Lev 9:23-10:2; 16:2; Num 12:5; 14:10; 16:35; 20:6). Theophany between the cherubim, over the ark, is more elusive (and exclusive) to Moses and Aaron. Israel Knohl makes a further subtle distinction between the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle in “Two Aspects of the ‘Tent of Meeting’,” in *Tehillah le-Moshe; Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, eds. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 73-79.

<sup>23</sup> See the list of symbolic meanings for the burning bush in Exod. Rab. 2:5, Tanḥuma (ed. Buber) Shemot 12; Sifre Zuta 10. Drawing on the allusion to God’s pathos in Psalm 91:15 and Isaiah 62:9, the midrashic tradition suggests that God is *with* Israel in their suffering, just as the fire (representing God) constricts itself in the thorn bush (representing Israel and the trials they endure), yet the bush is not consumed/destroyed.

<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew term *halom* is uncommon enough to warrant comment. It can serve as adverb of place, as in “hither/here” or “thither/there” (as in Judg 18:3, 20:7, 1 Sam 10:22 and 14:16, and Ruth 2:14), or as a temporal marker, in the figurative sense as in 2 Sam 7:18 (= 1 Chron 17:16) and Ps 73:10 (BDB entry 1988, p. 241). But only here, and in Gen 16:13 (Hagar’s naming of Beer La-hai Roi), does it coincide with a revelation, and a sense of a near-brush with death in the divine encounter.

<sup>25</sup> According to the Medieval exegete Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir 1085-1158, France), the so-called sin of Nadab and Abihu was simply a consequence of bad timing (*loc. cit.* Lev 9:24 and 10:1). They should not have offered the daily incense offering on the day of the Tabernacle’s consecration because that would generate an ambiguity as to the source of fire—human or divine—which emerged from the Holy Sanctum.

<sup>26</sup> The 250 Levites who offer their firepans are likewise incinerated (in the Korah episode), from which the law that no priest who is *not descended* from Aaron—*’ish zar*—may offer the incense offering (Num 17:5 MT = Num 16:40 KJ, RSV).

<sup>27</sup> Sommer, “Conflicting Constructions,” 61.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion in Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 129-30. He attributes this incident in Leviticus to PT, the earlier priestly layer, which removes any anthropomorphism and avoids any direct attribution of the fire to God.

<sup>29</sup> There is a subtle difference: the place is identified in the burning bush correctively as “for holy ground it is [*’admat qodesh h’u,*],” whereas, in Josh 5:15, the site is simply identified as *qodesh*.

<sup>30</sup> Joshua effectively makes Jericho into an *’ir nidaḥat*—a city conquered which is condemned to be utterly destroyed because of its associating with idolatry (Deut 13:13-19). Yet Jericho is rebuilt at the time Hiel (1 Kgs 16:34), with disastrous consequences.

<sup>31</sup> Christine Palmer, “Unshod on holy ground: Ancient Israel’s ‘Disinherited’ Priesthood,” in *Fashioning Jews; Clothing, Culture, and Commerce*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2013), 1-17 (13).

<sup>32</sup> Palmer, “Unshod on Holy Ground,” 7.

<sup>33</sup> Menahem Haran points out that, of the eight priestly garments meticulously described (Exod 28-29; 39), shoes are not included (*Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel*, 166). See the comprehensive review of the literature in Joachim J. Krause, “Barefoot

before God: Shoes and Sacred Space in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East,” in Christoph Berner, Manuel Schäfer, Martin Schott, Sarah Schulz and Martina Weingärtner (eds), *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible* (London: T&T Clark 2019), 315-322. See the discussion in Palmer, “Unshod on Holy Ground,” 1, 9. She argues that the priests served unshod *not* because footwear was unclean (contra Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 200), but because the tribe of Levi was given no inheritance in the land (Josh 13:33; Deut 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:11-13); they are given, however, forty-eight levitical cities with surrounding pastureland (Num 35:2-5).

<sup>34</sup> Moses may or may not remove his shoes—the narrator does not say—though in the context of Joshua, we are told that the general does so (Josh. 5:15).

<sup>35</sup> See Rachel Adelman, “From the Cleft of the Rock: The Eclipse of God in the Bible, Midrash and Post-Holocaust Theology,” in *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* (New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2019), 169-192.

<sup>36</sup> The scholarly literature is vast, but for an overview see Tryggve Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1987), 14-49. See most recently James Diamond “YHWH: The God that Is vs. the God that Becomes,” TheTorah.com (2017). <https://thetorah.com/article/yhwh-the-god-that-is-vs-the-god-that-becomes>; and the collection of essays, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, eds. David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (New York: New Paradigm Matrix 2019). The idea that the patriarchs were *not* familiar with the divine name, YHWH (see Exod 6:3) is surprising given God’s revelation to Abraham in the covenant between the pieces: “I am the LORD (YHWH) who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans...” (Gen. 15:7, a formula resonant with the opening formula of the *‘asseret ha-dibrot* Exod. 20:2). This provides fodder for the documentary hypothesis: God’s revelation at the burning bush is largely attributed to JE; whereas the “I am YHWH” speech in Exod 6:2-8, is attributed to the Priestly source (See Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 261-268).

<sup>37</sup> As in the statement before the theophany in the cleft of the rock: “...I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (33:19).

<sup>38</sup> Martin Buber, *Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc. 1988), 52-53. This reading is in line with the interpretation of Ramban (Nachmanides 1194-c. 1270), on Exod 3:13. Rashi, on the other hand,

reads the “being with” in terms of God’s actions, in being present for the Israelites in their suffering (based on b. Berakhot 9b; Exod. Rab. 3:6)—just as there is oppression under Egyptian slavery, there will be oppression under the foreign kingdoms to come and God will serve as Redeemer again.

<sup>39</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 22 (my emphasis).

<sup>40</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Sinai and Mishkan, see L. Michael Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus* (Leuven: Peeters 2012), 249-257.

<sup>41</sup> I paraphrase Ramban (Nachmanides) on Exod 25:1.

<sup>42</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 319. On this same point, see the review of the literature in Morales, *The Tabernacle Prefigured*, 257 n. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Raman on Exod 25:1 (author’s translation).

<sup>44</sup> While God speaks to Moses from the Holy of Holies (Exod 25:22; Num 7:89), it is actually not clear whether Moses *enters* the inner sanctum; he may stand at the opening and hear the voice from within (as in Num 12:5). According to Knohl this exclusive access to the Divine Presence is characteristic of the earlier layer (PT), in contrast to the later, post-exilic “populist” descriptions of the Presence, which appears at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting as in Exod 29:43: “For there I will meet with *you* [pl. *lakhem*], and there I will speak with *you* [*lakhem*, i.e. all the Israelites]” (*Sanctuary of Silence*, 180-86, 192-96).

<sup>45</sup> Nehemia Polen, “Touches of Intimacy: Leviticus, Sacred Space, Torah’s Centers”, in *A New Hassidism: Braches*, eds. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: JPS 2019), 41-71 (esp. 45-46).

<sup>46</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1999), 59.

<sup>47</sup> Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> See Rachel Adelman, “Wings of Desire: Theophany between the Cherubim”, in *Theology of Hebrew Scriptures* (Vol. 2 of SBL proceedings in Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, forthcoming), and <https://www.thetorah.com/article/atonement-for-the-golden-calf-with-the-kapporet>. This insight is based on Ramban’s reading of Exod. 25:1, where the cherubim simulate the fire of God’s Presence at Sinai.