"FIRE, CLOUD, AND DEEP DARKNESS"
(Deuteronomy 5:22): Deuteronomy’s Recasting of Revelation

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As the initial paper, and the only paper focusing on the Hebrew Bible itself, I hope to lay out some of the problems of the biblical text concerning revelation on Sinai. I will do this by highlighting the passage in Deuteronomy 5¹ that surrounds the Decalogue, examining how it interprets its likely sources,² and reflecting on the broader matters this interpretation raises, hinting ahead at issues that arise in some of the other papers in this volume. My comments are programmatic rather than comprehensive.³

The central Sinai texts in the book of Exodus are extremely difficult from a source-critical perspective—it is unclear how many different sources or traditions are represented. Baruch Schwartz, for example, finds the standard source-critical model of three sources in Exodus adequate to explain the variation in the chapters.⁴ Moshe Greenberg suggests that there are more than three sources present: “The extraordinary complexity is best explained as the result of interweaving of parallel narrations; the author appears to have been reluctant to exclude any scrap of data relevant to this momentous occasion”; and suggests that

¹ This chapter is typically seen (by and large) as a unity; see e.g., Christianus Brekelmans, “Deuteronomy 5: Its Place and Function,” in Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft (ed. N. Lohfink; BETL 68; Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University Press, 1985), 164–73.
² Many important insights on this issue are found in Benjamin D. Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology,” JR 79 (1999): 422–51.
³ For this reason, footnotes will be kept to a minimum.
the resulting “looseness and obscurity . . . may well have been intended as a literary reflex of the multivalence of the event.” 5 Jacob Licht outlines a full fifteen different conceptions of revelation. 6 I believe that the majority of scholars would agree with Greenberg, though perhaps not to the excesses of Licht, though there is no consensus because “the traditional source division is unable to cope” with the repetitions and doublets in Exodus 7 —“The details of narrative sequence in Exodus 19–20 are famously enigmatic.” 8

In addition to significant issues in disentangling the narrative material in Exodus, it is very unclear how the different blocks of legal material fit into the narrative, and at what stage of the tradition they were added. 9 Which sources or traditions believed in “the giving of a torah on Mt. Sinai”? Which is connected to the Decalogue in Exodus? Which is connected to the tradition at the end of ch. 20, after the Decalogue, concerning the building of an altar? Which is connected with the longer set of laws in chs. 21–23, which begin, “These are the rules that you shall set before them”? The problems involved with the narrative descriptions of revelation, and the connections between the narrative and the law, seem truly intractable.

The situation with Deuteronomy is different. Most scholars agree that the two central relevant sections in Deuteronomy, chs. 4 and 5:1–6:3, knew Exodus as we now have it, perhaps without the Priestly texts. 10 Furthermore, there is a consensus among scholars of Deuteronomy that the material in ch. 4 is later than that found in ch. 5–ch. 4 is Dtr 2, namely a revision during the Babylonian exile of Dtr 1. 11 The implication of this consensus is that we may assume that these Deuteronomists knew much of the material in Exodus that we now have. Thus, if we

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8 Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 431.
10 Childs, Exodus, 359; and Thomas B. Dozeman, God on the Mountain (SBLMS 37; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).