

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

‘THEY BEHELD GOD’

A LITERARY EXPLORATION OF THE THEOPHANIES AT SINAI

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INTRODUCTION

Theophany is a Greek term for a visible manifestation of the divine. These dramatic and, at times, unexpected appearances function within the Pentateuchal narratives as a means of divine revelation. This paper examines the literary form and function of the theophanies in the Sinai pericope: the manifestation of Yahweh in preparation for the covenant (Exod 19:16-22) and the celebration of the covenant ratification (Exod 24:9-11), where Israel's leadership is recorded as seeing "the God of Israel" before Moses is called separately by Yahweh to receive the written Torah. Some scholars argue that these theophanies are unrelated to their literary setting based on documentary and traditio-historical concerns.¹ However, this paper suggests that each theophany serves an important framing function, thereby contributing to the literary unity of the narrative.

THEOPHANY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

According to Mark Boyer, theophany can be defined as "the appearance of a god in a visible form to a human being."² The term is formed by the combination of two Greek words, *theos* meaning 'god' and *phainein* meaning 'to appear.'³ Walter Brueggemann adds that biblical theophany is a "genre of testimony that describes Yahweh's massive intrusion into life in a way that exhibits Yahweh's awesome, ferocious power."⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, such appearances are divinely initiated, generally temporary, and related to bringing either salvation or judgment.⁵

¹ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 17, 35. Documentary (i.e., source) analysis seeks to uncover the hypothetical "source" documents used in the composition of the Pentateuch. Classically, its proponents posit four sources dating from roughly 840 BCE to 450 BCE. Traditio-historical analysis seeks to describe the process by which once independent oral traditions were combined into the literary documents that, according to the documentary hypothesis, comprise the Pentateuch.

² Mark Boyer, *Divine Presence: Elements of Biblical Theophanies*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), Kindle edition, Loc. 127.

³ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai. Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 17.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 568.

⁵ Niehaus, *God at Sinai. Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*, 20-25.

Many of the theophanies in the Hebrew Bible appear in the Pentateuch, particularly in the patriarchal narratives and the book of Exodus. In these appearances, both the manner in which Yahweh reveals Himself and the parties to such revelation vary. As Brueggemann states, “Yahweh relates as Yahweh chooses, without condition, reservation, qualification, or explanation.”⁶ Some, although not all, theophanic encounters recorded in Scripture were accompanied by natural disturbances such as earthquakes, fire, cloud, wind, thunder, and smoke.⁷ Boyer states, “naturally occurring phenomena are employed by biblical authors to portray the glory of the Lord.”⁸ Because these phenomena are usually associated with primeval, elemental forces, God is portrayed as controlling such forces. Similar events were considered to regularly accompany the presence of a deity in the ancient Near East as an indication of their power. The Canaanite god Ba‘al, for example, is depicted in certain texts as “commanding the storms, unleashing the lightning and rushing to war as a divine warrior.”⁹ Sumerian, Hittite, Akkadian, and Ugaritic mythologies all depict the gods as controlling meteorological phenomena in battle against their enemies. While Israel shared in the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East, what distinguished Israelite understanding of such phenomena was its purpose in divine revelation, not battle, insofar as “natural phenomena reveal something of the name and therefore the character” of Yahweh.¹⁰

While the essential characteristic of theophany is the appearance of God, equally important are the ways that God chooses to conceal Himself. According to Mark Rooker,

⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 569.

⁷ Mark F Rooker, “Theophany,” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 861.

⁸ Mark Boyer, *Divine Presence*, Loc. 125. Boyer identifies twenty-one elements found in biblical theophanies.

⁹ Boyer, Loc. 1361; William Johnstone, *Exodus*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 48; quote taken from John H. Walton, Mark W. Chavalas, and Victor Harold Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 547.

¹⁰ Quote taken from Boyer, Loc. 3537; Walton, Chavalas, and Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 97, 380.

“whenever the Lord reveals himself, he also conceals himself.”¹¹ The reason for concealment, at times in the form of a thick cloud, is likely related to the priestly concept of God’s holiness — a term describing God’s moral purity and perfection.¹² God’s holiness is also evidenced in theophanic encounters because the location where God appears is sanctified — that is, made holy by His presence.

‘THE WHOLE MOUNTAIN SHOOK’ - EXODUS 19:16-22

Observations based on the NRSV ¹³	Opening Frame (Exod 19:16-22)
Elements of divine manifestation	Thunder, lightning, thick cloud, blast of a trumpet (v. 16); smoke, fire, earthquake (v. 18)
Human response	All the people trembled (v. 16)
Accompanying instruction/action	Anyone coming up the mountain to look upon the Lord would perish (vv. 21-22)

Exodus 19:16-22 provides a vivid description of Israel’s “definitive and decisive encounter with Yahweh.”¹⁴ The theophany is portrayed with the imagery first of a thunderstorm, followed by smoke, fire and an earthquake.¹⁵ These scenes are linked by the blast of a trumpet, the sound of which intensified as the encounter progressed. Yahweh’s presence is not only seen but also heard and felt by all of Israel.¹⁶ Notably, the same Hebrew word (*ḥērad*) is translated as “trembled” (v. 16) and “shook” (v. 18) when describing the response of the people and mountain,

¹¹ Rooker, “Theophany,” 861.

¹² Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 152-154.

¹³ Biblical citations throughout are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, 569.

¹⁵ V. 16 “thick” is rendered as “dark” in the LXX. Both words convey the notion that the cloud was dense and obscured visibility. Meyers writes that the cloud, “is intended to hide God’s physical manifestation, for the people are meant to hear but not see the deity, who is the epicenter of holiness,” *Exodus: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 151.

¹⁶ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 196.

respectively, to God's arrival. Trembling is the appropriate response to being in God's presence (cf., Ps 114:7).¹⁷

With the people assembled at the foot of the mountain, "Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." *Béqol*, translated as "in thunder," can also mean "by voice" or "aloud." Based on the context of the passage, Alexander rightly concludes that the use of 'thunder' seems inappropriate.¹⁸ Deuteronomy 4:12 states that the people heard the sound of words. The LXX and Targum Onkelos translates it as "with sound" and "by a voice," respectively. Similarly, Torah commentator Shmuel ben Meir (c. 1085 - 1174 CE), better known as Rashbam, states that "God responded in a loud voice audible to all." Yahweh then summons Moses to the top of the mountain, where He reminds Moses to warn the people not to come up the mountain lest they be destroyed. The instruction underscores the holiness of the mountain as a consequence of Yahweh's presence.

Source and Traditio-Historical Analysis

It is widely acknowledged that Exod 19 is marked by significant source complexity.¹⁹ Wellhausen attributed vv. 16-19 to E and vv. 20-22 to J, basing his division on where Moses was with the people during the theophany and when he was alone with Yahweh.²⁰ Wellhausen himself rejected the historicity of the Sinai theophany, viewing it as a literary device used to dramatically elevate the origin story of ancient Israel.²¹

Following Wellhausen, Bäntsch (1903) proposed a more detailed division between J and E. He assigned vv. 18, 20, 21 to J and vv. 16-17 and 19 to E based, in part, on differences in

¹⁷ Boyer, Loc. 2194.

¹⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus (Apollos Old Testament Commentary)*, (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2017), 383.

¹⁹ Meyers, 142.

²⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), Kindle edition, 344-345.

²¹ Niehaus, 50.

divine name and perceived conceptual distinctions in the theophanic elements. Gressman, deviating significantly from Bāntsch's proposed divisions and disregarding the distinction in divine names, assigned all of the verses to E with the exception of v. 18, which he assigned to J. More recently, Van Seters (1988) assigned vv. 16-19 to J and vv. 20-22 to P.²² Other critical scholars have proposed entirely different source divisions, the effect of which has been to cast even greater doubt as to the effectiveness of this critical method.²³

In response, some critical scholars have employed traditio-historical methods to recover the oral traditions believed to lie behind the literary sources. Mowinckel (1927) proposed that the events at Sinai described a cultic festival celebrated at the temple in Jerusalem cast in the language of mythology.²⁴ Over a decade later, Von Rad (1938) proposed that the Sinai tradition originated from an autumn festival during the pre-monarchic period and was added to the Exodus account at a later stage.²⁵ Building on Von Rad's work, Martin Noth (1948) concluded that the Sinai theophany was an originally independent credal tradition (i.e., expression of faith) rooted in a covenant renewal ceremony at the Shechem cult.²⁶ As these examples illustrate, this approach is highly speculative and offers no greater consensus on the process by which a text was composed.²⁷ Moreover, by "uproot[ing] biblical passages from their literary and historical context and attribut[ing] them to a later, cultic setting" traditio-historical criticism profoundly affects one's interpretation of the biblical text.²⁸

Literary Analysis

22 Alexander, *Exodus*, 379.

23 Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 344-347.

24 Neihaus, 56.

25 Alexander, 36.

26 Neihaus, 58.

27 Alexander, 42.

28 Niehaus, 78.

The biblical testimony is that gathered at the foot of the mountain, Israel experienced an overwhelming, personal encounter with Yahweh.²⁹ From a literary perspective, the theophany plays a pivotal role in the Sinai pericope by publicly legitimizing Moses as mediator. In Exod 19:9, Yahweh informs Moses that He will speak publicly so that the people will believe in and trust Moses “ever after.” Medieval Jewish exegete Rashi (c. 1040-1105 CE) understood this purpose as concerning both Moses directly and the prophetic office more broadly, hence he remarks “also in the prophets who will follow you.”

At the climax of the theophany, with the blasts of the trumpet at their loudest, Israel witnesses Moses conversing with Yahweh. Moses alone is then summoned by Yahweh to the mountain top. The scene in its totality indeed legitimates Moses in the eyes of Israel, just as Yahweh had stated.³⁰ This is evident from the people’s reaction reported in Exod 20:18-19. The encounter with Yahweh evoked great fear among the Israelites and prompted the call for Moses to mediate on their behalf. Although this passage follows the Decalogue, commentators have long concurred that the reaction described in Exod 20:18-19 is not limited to the Decalogue and must be viewed in the context of the theophany as a whole.³¹ This is reflected in the echoing description of theophanic elements in Exod 20:18.

The theophany also sets the stage for the divine speech that follows in Exod 20ff. As Moses seeks to comfort the frightened Israelites, he tells them that Yahweh’s presence was intended “to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Fear in this context is not the emotion of terror or fright, but rather conveys the sense of awe and reverence.³² In Scripture, ‘fear of God’ is specifically associated with obedience to God’s commandments

29 Johnstone, *Exodus. Old Testament Guides*, 106.

30 Brueggemann, 570; Childs, 369.

31 Childs, 364-371.

32 Childs, 373.

(cf., Deut 5:29). In other words, the theophany was meant to inspire the Israelites to obey the divine commandments and laws which followed. William Johnstone rightly states that the theophanic encounter constituted a “...moment of preparation for covenant.”³³

‘THEY BEHELD GOD’ - EXODUS 24:9-11

Observations based on the NRSV	Closing Frame (Exod 24:9-11)
Elements of divine manifestation	‘the God of Israel,’ his feet, ‘something like a pavement of sapphire stone’ (v. 10)
Human response	They ate and drank (v. 11b)
Accompanying instruction/action	The leaders ‘beheld God’ and were unharmed (v. 11a)

Exodus 24:9-11 records a theophany account that is unique in its testimony that the leadership of ancient Israel saw God. The account begins with Moses, Aaron and his sons, and seventy of Israel’s elders — representing the nation of Israel as a whole — ascending Mount Sinai.³⁴ Once up the mountain, v. 10 states that the leadership saw (*rā’â*) God. The assertion is striking, particularly in light of Yahweh’s later statement to Moses that, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20).³⁵ Both the LXX and Targum Onkelos considerably soften the Hebrew text, translating it as “...saw the place, there where the God of Israel stood” and “...saw the glory of the God of Israel,” respectively. In doing so, they avoid any conflict with Exod 33:20.³⁶ The text, however, does not assert that the men witnessed God’s face, although this may be implied.³⁷ Rather, it first mentions Yahweh’s feet, resting on “something like” a pavement or floor composed of sapphire. Since sapphire was unknown in the ancient

³³ Johnstone, 106.

³⁴ Walton, Chavalas, and Matthews, 104.

³⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 442.

³⁶ Alexander, *Exodus*, 538.

³⁷ Brueggemann, 425. He states, “there is no doubt that this testimony means to say that one of the characteristic markings of Israel is to be in Yahweh’s presence, to see God, to commune with Yahweh directly, face to face.”

Near East, what is more likely envisaged here is lapis lazuli, a stone used to decorate royal audience chambers and thrones.³⁸ Regardless, the allusion to architecture suggests that the men were able to glimpse something of God's heavenly abode.³⁹ The quick repetition of the word "like" in v. 10 conveys the sense that what was witnessed was impossible to describe precisely.

Verse 11 begins by stating that God did not "lay his hand" on the men, an expression that implies hostility or destruction and recalls the divine warning of Exod 19:21.⁴⁰ Hence the LXX states that not one of them "perished." Rashi and Rashbaum understood the statement as implying that the men were deserving of punishment for what they had witnessed, but that God withheld punishment because of the covenant. Other Jewish exegetes, however, view the statement more positively.⁴¹ The text then repeats the claim from v. 10, this time stating that the men "beheld" God. The verb used here is *hazah*; it can mean "to look, observe" or "to have visions" in a prophetic sense. According to Childs, its use "appears to be an attempt to characterize this viewing as a special category of perception."⁴² Lastly, the text records the men collectively eating and drinking safely in God's presence.

Source and Traditio-Historical Analysis

Most critical commentators have argued that Exod. 24:1-11 is based on more than one literary source; however, no consensus exists as to those sources.⁴³ Some scholars attribute verses 1-2, 9-11 to E and verses 3-8 to J. Others advocate the reverse of this, attributing verses 1-2, 9-11 to J and verses 3-8 to E.⁴⁴ Still others assign vv. 9-11 to the priestly source P.⁴⁵ Some scholars have proposed that vv. 1, 9-11 reflect an early tradition originally unconnected to the Mosaic

³⁸ Boyer, Loc. 3328; Meyers, 207; Walton, Chavalas, and Matthews, 105.

³⁹ Meyers, 207.

⁴⁰ Alexander, *Exodus*, 547.

⁴¹ Ernest W. Nicholson, "Interpretation of Exodus 24:9-11," *Vetus Testamentum* 24 no 1 (Jan 1974): 89-91.

⁴² Childs, 507.

⁴³ Alexander, 69; Nicholson, "Interpretation of Exodus 24:9-11," 78-79.

⁴⁴ Nicholson, "Interpretation of Exodus 24:9-11," 78-79.

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, 425; Childs, 500.

office of mediator.⁴⁶ Nicholson, for example, argues that vv. 9-11 originally only mentioned the seventy elders of Israel and is therefore likely to be pre-Mosaic in origin.⁴⁷ Critical scholars generally agree that vv. 3-8 appear to constitute an independent account likely reflecting a separate oral tradition focusing on covenant-ratification or covenant renewal.⁴⁸

Given the lack of consensus regarding the division of sources, critical scholars have also approached the text from a traditio-historical perspective, seeking to understand the nature and meaning of the tradition embodied in the text. The work of Ernest W. Nicholson, who penned several articles investigating Exod 24:9-11, is representative of this scholarship. By examining the passage without consideration of vv. 3-8 (which he agrees constitutes a separate unit of tradition) and based on the marked difference in the depiction of Yahweh from the theophany account in Exod 19, Nicholson finds that “the tradition in Exodus 24:9-11 neither knows of nor implies the existence of a covenant between Israel and ‘the God of Israel.’”⁴⁹ He further argues that Exod 24:9-11 is best understood as a theophany tradition which “knows nothing” of the cloud, thunderstorm, smoke, or fire Exod 19.⁵⁰

Literary Analysis

Despite its brevity, the text of Exod 24:9-11 is of considerable importance. In its present form, the passage concludes the covenant first announced in Exod 19 and is intimately connected to the preceding chapters.⁵¹ However, before commenting further on the theophany, it is important to highlight the covenant-ratification rituals that precede it in order to fully appreciate its literary setting.

⁴⁶ Alexander, *Exodus*, 542; Childs, 501.

⁴⁷ Ernest W. Nicholson, “Origin of the tradition in Exodus 24:9-11,” *Vetus Testamentum* 26 no 2 (Apr 1976): 159.

⁴⁸ Alexander, 69; Alexander, *Exodus*, 539; Childs, 501.

⁴⁹ Nicholson, “Interpretation of Exodus 24:9-11,” 77.

⁵⁰ Nicholson, “Interpretation of Exodus 24:9-11,” 97.

⁵¹ Alexander, *Exodus*, 540; Childs, 503.

In Exod 24:5, Moses commissions young men to offer “burnt offerings” and “offerings of well-being” to Yahweh. The burnt offering atoned for the sins of the people and so established fellowship with God. It also symbolized the allegiance of Israel to the terms of the covenant. The well-being or “peace offering” (NASB, KJV, ESV) expressed appreciation for covenant fellowship.⁵² Following these offerings, Moses reads aloud the terms of the covenant and the people repeat their vow of allegiance from the day prior before adding to it “...and we will be obedient.” Moses then seals their commitment with a blood rite, taking the sacrificial blood that earlier was set aside in basins and scattering it on the people. Although the significance of this last act is not entirely clear, some scholars understand it as symbolizing the covenantal union of two parties. It may also indicate the solemn nature of the oath by dramatizing the consequence of covenant breaking — that is, death.⁵³ It is only after these rituals are completed and the people reaffirm their commitment to the covenant terms that Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the seventy elders proceed up the mountain.

Nicholson correctly states that the experience of the men in God’s presence was “unique and privileged.” However, he wrongly concludes that “far from witnessing to the approachability of God, this tradition testifies to his otherness.”⁵⁴ In light of the ratification of the covenant, the divine invitation for the men to come up the mountain and worship (Exod 24:1) and the testimony that they saw God takes on added significance, underscoring the changed nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. This is further emphasized by the use of the expression “God of Israel” in Exod 24:10, which rarely appears in the Pentateuch.⁵⁵

52 John W. Hilber, “Theology of Worship in Exodus 24,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 2 (June 1996): 181-182.

53 Hilber, “Theology of Worship in Exodus 24,” 182.

54 Nicholson, “Origin of the tradition in Exodus 24:9-11,” 157.

55 Alexander, *Exodus*, 547.

The final clause “they ate and drank” places the whole account into the context of a covenant meal, following a pattern found elsewhere in Scripture of celebrating the consummation of a covenant relationship with a meal (cf., Gen 26:30; 31:54).⁵⁶ Because Nicholson rejects the broader narrative setting of Exod 24:9-11, he also rejects the interpretation of the men eating and drinking as a covenant meal, instead proposing that it is a poetic expression meaning the men “lived” or “survived.”⁵⁷ However, the literary structure of Exod 24:1-11 supports reading the passage as a unified account rather than separating the theophany (vv. 9-11) from the covenant-ratification rituals (vv. 3-8).⁵⁸ More likely, as John Hilber concludes, is that the “table fellowship around the covenant meal climaxed their worship of God.”⁵⁹ That God Himself has not changed is evident from Exod 24:17. From the vantage point of the Israelites below, Yahweh was, and remains, a “devouring fire.” However, a new avenue of communion and fellowship with God has been afforded to Israel by the covenant.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

The theophanies of Exod 19:16-22 and 24:9-11 frame the Sinai pericope and, in so doing, contribute to the literary unity of the narrative. The opening frame’s terrifying depiction of God resembles the description of the arrival of a deity found in other ancient Near Eastern texts. The encounter evokes great fear among the people and prompts Israel’s call for Moses to mediate. In contrast, the closing frame is unique among theophany accounts in its testimony that the leaders of Israel “saw” and “beheld” God. Whereas previously God was veiled to Israel by a cover of cloud and smoke, now the leadership could not only glimpse the heavenly abode but was invited to feast in God’s presence.

⁵⁶ Childs, 507; Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, 443.

⁵⁷ Nicholson, “Origin of the tradition in Exodus 24:9-11,” 149, 156.

⁵⁸ Alexander, 70. He states, “since verses 1–2, 9–11 and verses 3–8 taken together form a coherent account, no justification exists for maintaining that more than one source is present in Exodus 24:1–11.”; Hilber, 184 n. 37.

⁵⁹ Hilber, 184.

⁶⁰ Childs, 507.

The striking contrast between these two accounts has long been cited as evidence of different literary sources embodying different oral traditions. However, in its present form, the “shift in imagery also influences the entire reading” of the Sinai pericope.⁶¹ That God has not changed is evident from Exod 24:17, which recalls that God once again appears “like a devouring fire.” What has changed is God’s relationship with Israel because of the covenant, and the theophanic imagery serves to visibly underscore the nature of this changed relationship. While Exod 24:9-11 may have originally reflected an older, separate unit of tradition as Nicholson argues, its significance in the text’s final form should not be understated. The imagery of the men eating and drinking in God’s presence is one of access, intimacy, and fellowship. From a literary perspective, it functions as the climax of the covenant first announced in Exod 19, echoing back to the intimate fellowship humanity enjoyed with God before the Fall even as it points forward to the tabernacle as the locus for communion with God.

New Testament Significance

As divine revelation, both the thunder of Sinai and the communal meal communicate something about God’s character. One often hears that the God at Sinai — a God of fire and judgment — is different from the God of love and salvation found at Calvary. However, both the Old and New Testaments remind us that while the mode of God’s revelation may change, God does not.⁶² Indeed, He remains a “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). Hamilton writes, “God is a consuming fire at Sinai. God is a consuming fire at Calvary and at Pentecost. God will be a consuming fire at the parousia.”⁶³

61 Childs, 508.

62 Childs, 377.

63 Hamilton, 311.

At the same time, “God, as royal host,...is a manifestation of divine hospitality.”⁶⁴ In its immediate literary context, the communal meal of Exod 24 functions as a sign confirming the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel.⁶⁵ However, when viewed in light of the new covenant, Exod 24:9-11 has multiple meanings. It reminds us that, just as God graciously invited Israel into communion and fellowship with Him on Sinai, God invites the church into communion and fellowship with Him through Jesus Christ today. It also foreshadows the eschatological banquet where the faithful will enjoy a feast of “rich food” and “well-aged wines” (Isa 25:6-8) alongside “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11-12).⁶⁶ In doing so, Exod 24:9-11 embodies the promise that, at the parousia, those reckoned as righteous through faith in Christ will see God (Matt 5:8; 1 Cor 13:12; Rev 22:4).

64 Boyer, Loc. 2843.

65 Childs, 504; Meyers, 207.

66 Niehaus, 198, 348.

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