

Seeing and Hearing God

On the Relationship between John 5:37 and Deut 4:12

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Abstract

Jesus' statement in John 5:37, about how the Jews have not heard the voice nor seen the appearance of his Father, should be interpreted as polemics built on a reworked allusion to Deut 4:12. The polemics correspond to a distinction between seeing and hearing. The Jews have overlooked the Father's visual testimony in Jesus' works, and they have failed to truly hear the audible testimony in the Scriptures. Jesus' statement presupposes that God has already manifested himself audibly in prior redemptive history, but also claims that God has now disclosed himself visually in an unprecedented way. What was not seen at Sinai can now be seen.

Keywords: *seeing, hearing, allusion, polemics*

Sammendrag

Jesu utsagn i Joh 5:37, om at jødene verken har hørt stemmen eller sett skikkelsen til hans Far, er ment polemisk og bygger på en omtolket bruk av 5 Mos 4:12. Polemikken styres av en skjelning mellom å se og å høre; jødene har overhørt Guds hørbare vitnesbyrd i Skriftene, og de har oversett hans synlige vitnesbyrd i Jesu gjerninger. Jesu utsagn forutsetter at Gud allerede har talt i tidligere frelseshistorie, men påstår samtidig at Gud nå har gjort seg selv synlig på en unik måte i Jesus. Det man den gang ikke kunne se på Sinai, er nå blitt synlig.

Nøkkelord: *å se, å høre, allusjon, polemikk*

THIS ARTICLE IS DEDICATED to the interpretation of Jesus' statement in John 5:37, with particular emphasis on how the statement interacts with Deut 4:12.¹ Jesus' statement is given in the middle of a monologue (5:31–47), in which he defends himself against accusations of breaking the Sabbath and making himself equal to God (5:18). After having defined the nature and extent of his authority (5:19–30), Jesus goes on to defend its legitimacy (5:31–47). He does this by appealing to witnesses who testify in his favor, including John the Baptist (5:31–35), his works (5:36), the Father himself (5:36–37a), and the Scriptures (5:39). Jesus not only defends himself, however, but also criticizes his Jewish interlocutors in several ways (5:38–47). This, in short, is the rhetorical context of Jesus' claim in 5:37, that the Jews have neither heard the voice nor seen the appearance of the Father who testifies in Jesus' favor.

This statement raises several interpretive difficulties that remain controversial within present scholarly discussion of the passage.² In this article, I argue that in interpreting 5:37, a key is to distinguish clearly between “hearing” and “seeing” the Father.³ If this distinction is made, then several interpretive difficulties are arguably resolved, and a more nuanced interpretation of 5:37 becomes possible. Distinguishing between “hearing” and “seeing” the Father allows us to be more precise about what kind of polemical point Jesus is making in 5:37, how Jesus' statement interacts with traditions about the Sinai revelation, and how 5:37 alludes to and reworks Deut 4:12.

The first issue to be decided, however, before these points can be developed, is simply *whether* 5:37 should be interpreted as polemics.

John 5:37 Interpreted as Polemics

Charles Dodd interprets 5:37 as a parenthetical and non-polemical statement, which he paraphrases as follows: “True, God has not a voice to be heard, any more than he has a form to be seen.”⁴ Dodd thus reads 5:37 as an affirmation that God is metaphysically invisible and incorporeal.⁵ J. D. Atkins has proposed another non-polemical interpretation of 5:37, in which Deut 5:23–27, where the people request that God's voice is mediated to them through a prophet, becomes the hermeneutical key. He paraphrases 5:37 as follows: “[Of course] you have never heard his voice [directly, for your ancestors requested prophetic mediators instead] nor have you seen his form, [for no one sees God].”⁶ These non-polemical readings do not do justice to the immediate context, however.

The statements about the Jews in 5:37 should be read in light of all the other things Jesus has to say about them in 5:31–47: they only remained in the light of the Baptist's testimony for a short while (5:35); they do not have the word of God remaining among them (5:38); they do not believe in the one sent by

the Father (5:38); they wrongly imagine that they have life simply by searching the Scriptures (5:39); they refuse to come to Jesus in order to receive life (5:40); they do not have God's love in them (5:42); they do not receive Jesus (5:43); they do receive others who come in their own name (5:43); they seek honor among each other instead of from God (5:44); they will stand accused before Moses (5:45); and they believe neither Moses nor Jesus (5:46–47). Almost everything Jesus has to say about the Jews in 5:31–47 carries some kind of accusation, and it would be remarkable if 5:37 was the only exception.⁷ Indeed, rather than being an exception to the general polemical tone in 5:31–47, it is more likely that 5:37 represents the key indictment from which all the other criticism follows. It is notable that a change in tone takes place precisely in 5:37, from defense to accusation. Almost all the critical comments made by Jesus are found in 5:38–47. A plausible inference would thus be that 5:37 begins Jesus' accusations against the Jews, and that the claims about not having heard and seen the Father should be read as examples of how Jesus indicts the Jews of a blameworthy lack of knowledge concerning the God on whose behalf they claim to speak (cf. 8:19; 55).⁸ In this reading, all the other mistakes made by the Jews, recorded in 5:38–47, can be traced back to their fundamental ignorance of God. To describe Jewish ignorance of God in terms of not hearing and not seeing is coherent with other passages in John. When God's voice is sounded the people misidentify it (12:29–30). Even if signs are worked in front of their eyes they act as if they were blind (12:37–43).⁹

A further argument in support of the view that Jesus indicts the Jews of ignorance of God is the fact that 5:37 seems designed to delegitimize the Jews' disbelief. The Father has testified in support of Jesus (5:37a). If the Jews have not noticed it, this is not because God has failed to testify clearly, but because they have failed to see and hear it. Since they have never seen nor heard God, they are unable to *recognize* a divine testimony.¹⁰ Their objections to Jesus' ministry are therefore vacuous.

A final argument in favor of a polemical reading of 5:37, which will be discussed in more detail below, is the fact that 5:37 seems to allude to but also negate what is said in Deut 4:12. This reworked allusion to Deut 4:12 suggests a critique of the Jews and/or the Sinai revelation to which they appeal. However, the nature of the relationship between 5:37 and the Sinai revelation in general, and 5:37's relation to Deut 4:12 in particular, demands separate discussion.

John 5:37 and the Sinai Revelation: Three Main Positions

When it comes to the relationship between 5:37 and the Sinai revelation, three main positions can be identified in current scholarship. The first position, voiced by Urban von Wahlde, rejects the assumption that the key to understanding 5:37 is to interpret it in light of some Old Testament text(s) to which

it allegedly alludes. Instead 5:37 could be interpreted in light of the discourse about hearing and seeing God within John, where it is emphasized that Jesus alone has truly seen and heard God (cf. 1:18; 3:13; 6:46) and that only Jesus can fully reveal God (1:18; 3:31–36; 5:19; 5:30; 8:26–28, 38, 40, 55; 12:49–50; 14:10, 24; 17:14). Jesus' words are God's words (3:34; 8:26, 38, 40; 12:49–50), and if one sees Jesus then one sees his Father (12:46; 14:7–9).¹¹ The statement in 5:37 is thus not concerned with whether or not God was seen and/or heard at Sinai, but is directed at those who, in their disbelief, fail to see and hear God in Jesus.¹²

While it is plausible that 5:37 points to the ways in which God can be heard and seen in Jesus, it seems very difficult to read 5:37 without significant reference to prior claims in Jewish tradition about God revealing himself visually and/or audibly at Sinai. The argumentative context in chapter 5 invites this reference, since it is built on a dispute about whether Jesus or the Jews enjoy the support of the Law. The Jews claim that Jesus stands in conflict with the Law, by breaking the Sabbath and making himself equal to God (5:18),¹³ and Jesus then turns the accusations back against the Jews. The Scriptures speak about Jesus (5:39), and the Jews' failure to believe in Jesus makes Moses their accuser (5:45–47).

The case for interpreting 5:37 in light of claims about how God revealed himself at Sinai is further strengthened by the fact that the terminology in 5:37 echoes texts that describe the Sinai revelation.¹⁴ Whereas Moses and the leaders of Israel are said to have seen God on Sinai (Exod 24:9–10), the people only saw the appearance of God's glory (τὸ δὲ εἶδος τῆς δόξης κυρίου, 24:17). Sirach claims that the people both heard and saw God when the law was given: "His majestic glory their eyes beheld, his glorious voice their ears heard" (17:13).¹⁵ The relationship between 5:37 and Deut 4:12 is particularly striking.

καὶ ἐλάλησεν κύριος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐκ μέσου τοῦ πυρός φωνὴν ῥημάτων ὑμεῖς ἠκούσατε καὶ ὁμοίωμα οὐκ εἶδετε ἀλλ' ἢ φωνὴν (LXX, Deut 4:12).
οὔτε φωνὴν αὐτοῦ πάποτε ἀκηκόατε οὔτε εἶδος αὐτοῦ ἐώρακατε (John 5:37).

Both these statements emphasize the duality of audible and visual manifestation, and both use the terms φωνή and ἀκούω to refer to the audible aspect. For the visual aspect of the revelation, John uses εἶδος and ὁράω whereas Deut uses ὁμοίωμα and ὁράω.¹⁶ Whereas εἶδος broadly denotes the appearance of something or its shape and form, and can be used for either humans (Gen 29:17; 39:6) or the divine (Gen 32:31–32; Exod 24:10, 17; Num 12:8; Ezek 1:16, 26), ὁμοίωμα more directly connotes the notion that what is seen can be imitated or function as the basis for constructing a likeness (cf. Exod 20:4; 2

Kings 16:1; Isa 40:19). However, also ὁμοίωμα can be used more generally about someone's appearance (Judg 8:18; Ps 144:12), or to describe a theophany (Ezek 1:28). The two terms are thus closely related. However, Deut 4:12 seems to deliberately use ὁμοίωμα in order to establish contact between the statement about how God revealed himself at Sinai and the wording of the second commandment, which prohibits the making of any εἰδωλον οὐδὲ παντὸς ὁμοίωμα of any living creature (cf. Deut 5:8).¹⁷ The most striking difference between 5:37 and Deut 4:12 is not tied to the choice of terminology, however, but to the basic structure of the statement. Whereas Deut 4:12 is governed by a not-but structure (οὐκ-ἀλλά), 5:37 follows a neither-nor structure (οὔτε-οὔτε).

The second main position is built on this strong evidence, which suggests that 5:37 interacts with claims about the Sinai revelation, especially as this revelation is portrayed in Deut 4:12. Based on this evidence, it is assumed that 5:37 is a deliberate refutation of all that Deut 4:12 confirms.¹⁸ It is likely that the Jews of Jesus' day believed that God had revealed himself visually and/or audibly at Sinai, and that this served to legitimize the Torah.¹⁹ A possible interpretation of 5:37 is that it functions to discredit these assumptions: at no point in history (cf. *πόποτε*, 5:37) did Israel see or hear God. Israel's history thus loses its character as divine revelation.²⁰ The strength of this reading is that it puts due emphasis on the polemical character of 5:37, and the allusion to Deut 4:12. However, it seems to leave us with too negative a view of the Sinai revelation. What Jesus appears to be doing in 5:31–47 is not discrediting earlier revelations in the history of Israel, but claiming the Scriptures of Israel in general, and Moses in particular, as valid authorities that serve to legitimize himself. Moreover, this interpretation does not highlight the specific discourse about seeing and hearing in John, but tends to make 5:37 primarily a comment about whether God was seen or heard in the Israelite past.

The third main position acknowledges that Jesus' argument presupposes the validity of God's past revelation to Israel, and proposes that Jesus' polemic is directed solely at the disbelieving Jews of his day, and not the traditions to which they appealed. In rejecting Jesus, the Jews demonstrate that they, in contrast to ancient worthies in Israelite history, have never seen or heard God. They have not seen God's appearance, as did Jacob (Gen 32:30–31). They have not heard God's voice, as did Moses (cf. Exod 33:11) and the Israelites at Sinai (Deut 4:12). The word of God was truly given to them, but did not *remain* among them (5:38). In their disbelief, the Jews have thus in effect rejected their own tradition.²¹

As will become clear in the discussion below, this third position seems to accurately describe Jesus' rhetoric as far as hearing God's voice is concerned. However, when it comes to seeing God's appearance, one wonders whether

this third position is compatible with the more pessimistic statements found elsewhere in John (e.g. 1:18; 6:46). This third interpretation also creates a *general* contrast between the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day and various figures in the Israelite past, but it does not really explain the nature of the specific allusion to Deut 4:12.

All three positions outlined above thus seem to make valid points, but also to suffer from distinct weaknesses. This raises the question of whether it is possible to arrive at an interpretation that includes the strengths of these positions, while avoiding their weaknesses. It seems that we are looking for a reading of 5:37 that highlights the discourse of seeing and hearing *in* John; acknowledges past revelations to Israel; explains the provocative allusion to Deut 4:12; comes to terms with the denials in John that God has previously been seen; fits the immediate context; and captures the polemical nature of Jesus' statement. I will now argue that a clue to arriving at such an interpretation is to distinguish more clearly between seeing and hearing God.

Hearing and Seeing God: John 5:37 and Deut 4:12

The structure of 5:31–47 is disputed. Some suggest that the passage should be divided in two, after either verse 37a²², 38²³, or 40²⁴. These proposed divisions all have strong evidence that speak in their favor, and this suggests that it would be a mistake to make a sharp distinction between two main parts within 5:31–47. It seems instead that 5:31–47 consists of four loosely separated sections: testimonies that are rejected or relativized (5:31–35); the central testimony to which Jesus appeals (5:36–40); the question of seeking glory (5:41–44); the relationship between the Scriptures and faith in Jesus (5:45–47).²⁵ Within the flow of the argument, 5:36–40 functions as the center. It brings the emphasis on testimony to its climax. It is also the place where the tone shifts from defense to accusation. The references to the ways in which the testimony has not been received (5:37b–38a) are bracketed by references to Jesus as the one sent by God (5:37a, 38b), a theme which recurs in 5:43. The discussion of how faith in Jesus relates to loyalty to Moses (5:45–47) is introduced already in 5:39–40. John 5:36–40 thus sums up, or introduces, most of the key motifs in 5:31–47.

John 5:36–40 refers to three testimonies in Jesus' favor: his works (5:36), the Father (5:37) and the Scriptures (5:39–40). Some argue that these are three distinct testimonies, and this creates the problem of identifying when and how the Father testified.²⁶ Others propose that the testimony of the Father is found in the Scriptures, and that 5:37 anticipates 5:38–40.²⁷ Finally, some argue that the Father has testified through Jesus' works, and that 5:37 refers back to 5:36.²⁸ In our opinion the best solution is to hold that the testimony of the Father referred to in 5:37a is two-fold: it is found in Jesus' works and in the

Scriptures.²⁹ Jesus' works are said to have been *given* to him by the Father (5:36), and it therefore makes sense to see these works as having God as their ultimate source (cf. 10:25, 37; 14:10).³⁰ The Scriptures that speak of Jesus (5:39) could also be understood as God's own word, as is evident from the phrase τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ in 5:38.³¹ It is thus possible to see the entire section of 5:36–40 as being about the Father's testimony. A significant advantage of this interpretation is that it helps explain why 5:37 refers to *both* hearing and seeing God; the Father's witness in the Scriptures was audible/verbal, whereas the witness in the deeds is visual.³² This distinction between audible and visual revelation, and between the two ways in which the Father testifies in favor of Jesus, are arguably also the key to understanding the precise way in which 5:37 uses Deut 4:12, and the nature of Jesus' critique of the Jews.³³

When it comes to the interpretation of God's past testimony in the Scriptures, 5:37 uses language that is reminiscent of the Sinai-event: hearing God's voice. That the Sinai revelation is in focus is also confirmed by the reference to Moses in 5:45–47. We propose that John stands close to Deut 4:12 in holding that God primarily manifested himself audibly at Sinai.³⁴ Support for this view is found in 1:14–18. It is generally recognized that 1:14–18 draws on Exod 33–34, where the Sinai revelation is described, in order to interpret the Christ event.³⁵ As far as the Christ event is concerned, both visual and audible elements are emphasized. The glory of the only-begotten was seen (1:14), and Jesus has explained the Father (1:18b). As far as the Sinai revelation is concerned, however, it is only the audible element that is highlighted. The law was given through Moses (1:17), but no one has ever seen God (1:18a).³⁶

The fact that John does not describe God's mode of visual manifestation at Sinai does not imply, of course, that John would have denied that any visual manifestation took place. There is no reason to doubt that John believes that the giving of the Law was accompanied by different visual manifestations, such as fire and smoke. If we widen the scope from the giving of the Law to the entire Exodus narrative, it is evident that John sees some of Jesus' signs as being modeled on earlier divine manifestations. In 6:5–13 Jesus multiplies the loaves, and in 6:31–59 this is interpreted in light of the manna miracle. However, although such visual manifestations in prior redemptive history might be understood as foreshadowing Jesus' ministry, and also as providing the Jews with clues that could have equipped them for recognizing the legitimacy of Jesus' ministry, the fact remains that none of these manifestations seem to be viewed by John as constituting a vision of God himself. Although God has acted in ways that can be seen, God himself has previously not been seen, not even at Sinai. Nowhere in John do we find confirmations that God was seen at Sinai, and in 12:41 it seems that Isaiah's vision of God is reinterpreted to refer to Christ.³⁷ In the immediate context of 5:37 the positive significance of

the Sinai revelation is tied to the message conveyed, not God's mode of manifestation. The Scriptures testify about Jesus (5:39) and Moses wrote about him (5:46).

The assumption that God has testified in the Scriptures, such that his voice is available there, forms the basis of an indictment of the Jews, since God's voice is now sounded even more clearly in the Son. The reference to hearing the voice of God in 5:37 thus points back to the discussion about how those who hear the voice of Jesus will receive life (cf. 5:25). The Jews should have been able to recognize God's voice in Jesus' voice, since Jesus speaks the words he heard from his Father (12:46–50). The fact that they, for the most part, did not respond to Jesus in faith is thus evidence that they never truly *heard* the message of Scripture in the first place, no matter how much they seek to find life in it (5:39). This is probably the meaning of 5:38, which is open to two different interpretations. The particle ὅτι can be understood either as giving a reason why the Jews do not have God's word abiding among them, or as providing evidence that the Jews in fact do not have the word of God abiding among them. The second alternative better fits the immediate context.³⁸ We thus propose that 5:38 should be translated as follows: "you do not have his word remaining among you, as is evident from the fact that (ὅτι) you do not believe the one he sent." The phrase "his word" thus probably refers to God's revelation in Scripture, which was given to, but did not remain among, the Jews who failed to believe in the one sent by God. Faith in Jesus thus becomes the test case for loyalty to the Law (5:45–47). What Moses affirmed regarding the assembled Israelites in Deut 4:12, Jesus denies regarding the Jews in 5:37. As far as hearing God's testimony is concerned, 5:37 is thus a critique of the interlocutors of Jesus, and not of the Sinai revelation.

When it comes to God's visual manifestation in the works given Jesus to fulfil, however, a significantly different dynamic is at work. Many scholars, even among those who recognize that 5:37 functions polemically, find it difficult to assume that Jesus could *blame* the Jews for not having seen God.³⁹ If John shares the view of Deut 4:12, that God primarily manifested himself audibly at Sinai, and if Jesus alone enjoys an unmediated vision of God (1:18; 6:46), how could the Jews be blamed for not having seen God? Guided by such reasoning, some propose that Jesus is merely stating a matter of fact when he says that the Jews have never seen God. However, we will now suggest three ways in which the claim that the Jews have not seen God's appearance might function polemically in 5:37.

First of all, as already indicated, we propose that when Jesus speaks about seeing the appearance of God, he is no longer primarily describing the Sinai revelation, or any other past vision of God, but the works given him by God to fulfil. Thus, in contrast to Deut 4:12, the point is no longer that God has not

manifested himself visually, but that God's visual manifestation has been overlooked by the Jews.⁴⁰

Secondly, the statement is also polemical, in that it indirectly relativizes the Sinai revelation, or any other proposed theophany, in comparison with the Christ event. Following Deut 4:12, the Jews will have to admit that God has not previously disclosed his appearance, not even at Sinai. Now, however, a new stage in redemptive history is at hand, in which God reveals himself visually in a new way. This implies that the stakes are raised. Moses did not *blame* the Israelites for not having seen God's appearance, since as a matter of fact they never saw it. This is precisely what Jesus does, however, since God has now revealed himself visibly in him.

Thirdly and finally, Jesus' words about how the Jews have not seen God's appearance could also function as a critique of the confidence they profess in judging Jesus' claims. Since the Jews will have to admit that they have not seen God's appearance, they should not act as if they have. This is precisely what they tend to do, however. The works of Jesus are based on what Jesus sees the Father do (5:19–20). Their legitimacy is thus based on the "eyewitness testimony" of Jesus himself (cf. 3:32).⁴¹ Although the Jews have never had the kind of direct vision of the Father's work that Jesus enjoys, they still act as if they were the ultimate authority in judging the legitimacy of what Jesus does. The same point is made even more clearly in chapter 6, where the Jews reject Jesus' claim to have come down from heaven (6:38), on the grounds that they know Jesus' *parents* (6:41–42). Jesus exposes the irony in the professed insight of the Jews, by drawing attention to his divine "parent," his Father, whom the Jews have never seen (6:46). Being ignorant of God, the Jews see Jesus without believing (6:36). Had the Jews seen God, however, they would also have seen and believed Jesus (6:40).⁴²

The statements about hearing and seeing God in 5:37 thus both interact with Deut 4:12, but in very different ways. As far as hearing the voice of God is concerned, Jesus affirms that God has spoken to Israel through the Sinai revelation, as Deut 4:12 contends, but he uses this assumption to accuse the Jews of having deserted the very authority on which they base their trust. *Thus, even though 5:37 negates what Deut 4:12 confirms when it comes to hearing the voice of God, this is not evidence that John rejects Deuteronomy's view of the Sinai revelation.*

When it comes to seeing God's appearance, Jesus once again borrows language from Deut 4:12. However, the very words that in the context of Deut 4:12 functioned to denote the fact that God had chosen not to reveal himself visually to the Israelites are now used polemically. God has revealed himself visually in a redemptive historically unprecedented way, and one can now be blamed for not having seen God's appearance. *Thus, even though 5:37 affirms*

Deut 4:12, where it is said that God's appearance has not been seen, this is not evidence that John shares Deuteronomy's view that God has not revealed himself visually.

Fulfilling the Work of God: God's Visibility in Jesus

The interpretation above presupposes that the phrase "seeing the appearance of God" in 5:37 relates to the ἔργα of Jesus in 5:36, and that these ἔργα are interpreted as visual manifestations of the Father. The interpretation also proposes that these visual manifestations are to be understood not only as actions performed through God's power, comparable to miraculous events in prior redemptive history, but also as a visual manifestation of God's own appearance. What was not even seen at Sinai has now become visible in Jesus Christ. These interpretative presuppositions stand in need of further support, and such support will be provided by tracing the use of the term ἔργον/ἔργα in John. It is likely that the use of ἔργα in 5:36 refers to the sign in 5:1–15, but the visual nature of this action is not specifically emphasized in 5:1–47.⁴³ The only significant reference to sight is found in 5:19–20, where Jesus is pictured as seeing what the Father does.⁴⁴ However, in addition to its immediate reference to the sign performed in 5:1–15, the use of ἔργα in 5:36 arguably also points beyond itself to other significant passages in John, where the visual aspect of the ἔργα is highlighted and where the ἔργα can even be understood as manifestations of God himself.

The first significant passage is found in 9:3–4, the next Sabbath healing in John,⁴⁵ which Jesus interprets as an occasion for God's ἔργα becoming *manifest*.⁴⁶ The visual aspect of the upcoming healing is thus highlighted, as well as the fact that Jesus' action should be interpreted as God's own deed. The reference to working the works of the one who *sent* Jesus (9:4) recapitulates 5:17–20 and 5:36–38, where Jesus' deeds are interpreted as an expression of the work of the Father who sent him.

In 10:25 Jesus' ἔργα are once again echoing 5:36, interpreted as testimony (10:25). Jesus' works are intimately related to the Father, in whose name they are performed. Their visual nature is emphasized in 10:32, where Jesus says that he has showed the Jews many ἔργα. Just as the Father shows his works to Jesus (δείκνυσθαι, 5:20), Jesus now shows his works to the Jews (ἔδειξα, 10:32). Jesus' works properly belong to his Father (10:37), and they testify to Jesus' unity with his Father (10:30). The ἔργα of Jesus are thus a visual basis for believing that the Father is in Jesus and that Jesus is in the Father (10:38).⁴⁷

The thought of 10:25–38 is picked up once again in 14:7–11. The discourse is prompted by Thomas' question, about how they might know the way to the Father (14:5). Jesus answers by declaring that he is the way, the truth and the

life (14:6). This implies that knowledge of Jesus is knowledge of the Father, and that anyone who sees Jesus sees the Father (14:7). This is not stated as a timeless principle, but as something which is now finally accomplished: “from now on (*ἀπ’ ἄρτι*) you know him and have seen him.”⁴⁸ This reference to a specific moment from which God becomes known and visible in Jesus, most plausibly refers to the hour.⁴⁹ Despite Jesus’ declaration that the disciples know and have seen, the disciples keep asking questions that display their lack of comprehension. Philip responds by urging Jesus to show them the Father (14:8), to which Jesus responds: “Have I been with you this long, and still you do not know me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father. How then can you say: ‘show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak of myself, it is the Father who remains in me and works his deeds” (14:9–11). The Father’s visibility in Jesus is thus tied to the Father being present in Jesus, and doing his works in him (14:11).

A good case can be made for the view that 14:7–11 alludes to Exod 33:18–23. In particular, Philip’s request (*δεῖξον ἡμῖν τὸν πατέρα*, 14:8) seems to echo Moses’ plea to see God’s glory (*δεῖξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν*, Exod 33:18).⁵⁰ However, the differences between these two passages are just as salient as the similarities. In Exod 33:18–23, God does not directly answer Moses’ request to see his glory, but instead emphasizes the impossibility of seeing his face. Moses is only allowed to see God from behind. Although Moses was granted a very special vision, there are things humans are not permitted to see. Philip actually seems to ask for more than Moses did. His request is not indirectly phrased, in terms of seeing the *glory* of the Father.⁵¹ Still Jesus’ answer does not contain the slightest hint that Philip has asked for too much, or that his wish can only be partly and indirectly granted. In clear contrast to the account in Exod 33, Philip is instead rebuked for asking for what he has already been given.⁵² It thus seems that 14:7–11 should be read as implying that what was not even disclosed to Moses at Sinai can now be seen in Jesus.⁵³

Finally, there is an almost verbatim reiteration of 5:36 in the first and final statement on Jesus’ work:

4:34: ἵνα ποιήσω τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πέμψαντός με καὶ τελειώσω αὐτοῦ τὸ ἔργον
 5:36: τὰ ἔργα ἃ δέδωκέν μοι ὁ πατήρ ἵνα τελειώσω αὐτὰ
 17:4: τὸ ἔργον τελειώσας ὃ δέδωκάς μοι ἵνα ποιήσω

In 4:34, the first statement on Jesus’ *ἔργον*, Jesus cryptically declared that his food is to fulfil the work of the one who sent him. In 5:36 Jesus once again refers to the task laid upon him by his Father, to fulfill the works given him to do. This time Jesus’ speaks of *ἔργα* in the plural. Whereas 4:34 focuses on the

totality of Jesus' mission, 5:36 emphasizes the specific revelatory actions and words of Jesus.⁵⁴ There is no reason, however, to draw a sharp contrast between Jesus' one great ἔργον and his many ἔργα, since the many ἔργα point to the one ἔργον from which they derive their ultimate meaning. God's visibility in Jesus should therefore not be confined only to his miraculous signs, but should instead be understood to encompass all Jesus says, does and is.

What Jesus refers to as a task to be completed in 4:34 and 5:36, he declares in 17:4 that he has accomplished. In bringing the work given him by his Father to fulfilment, Jesus states that he has glorified the Father on earth (17:4). It is thus evident that Jesus must be referring to his own hour of glorification which has finally arrived (12:23; 13:1; 17:1).⁵⁵ The use of fulfilment terminology in 17:4 thus anticipates Jesus' cry on the cross: *τετέλεσται* (19:30). The use of *δόξα* terminology in 17:4 establishes a firm link between the completion of Jesus' ἔργον and God's visibility (cf. 1:14; 2:11; 11:40; 12:21–23, 41; 17:24).⁵⁶

When one traces the motif of Jesus' ἔργον/ἔργα in John, one discovers three things. First, almost all the relevant passages about ἔργον/ἔργα in other places in the gospel echo statements in 5:16–47. This suggests that 5:36 should be interpreted in light of the entire gospel, not only its immediate context. Second, Jesus' ἔργον/ἔργα are very closely linked to the Father: they are his works (9:4); they are done in his name (10:37); they have God as their ultimate subject (14:10); and they have been given Jesus by the Father (5:36; 17:4).⁵⁷ This indicates that Jesus' ἔργον/ἔργα can be understood as a manifestation of God himself. Third, we have seen that God becoming visible is a recurrent motif associated with Jesus' ἔργον/ἔργα. In one particular passage (14:7–11), we even saw that God's visibility in Jesus' ἔργα is juxtaposed with, and implied to go beyond, what was revealed to Moses on Sinai.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the interpretation of Jesus' statement in 5:37 that the Jews have not heard the voice or seen the appearance of the Father who testifies in Jesus' favor. I have argued that Jesus' statement should be interpreted as polemics, and that this polemic is based on a reworked allusion to Deut 4:12. A clue to making sense of this allusion and understanding the target of Jesus' polemics is to distinguish clearly between hearing and seeing God. This distinction allows for a two-fold critique of the Jews, which corresponds to the twofold testimony by the Father: the Father's testimony in Jesus' works has been overlooked, and the Father's testimony in the Scriptures has not been properly heard. Both these elements of critique draw on Deut 4:12, but in very different ways. John seems to share the view of Deut 4, that God primarily manifested himself audibly at Sinai, and uses this as a basis

for accusing the Jews of not having truly heard the message of their own Scriptures. However, in contrast to Deut 4, John also seems to claim that God has now manifested himself visually in a way that implies that the Jews could and should have seen the Father in the Son. The Jews are accused of having overlooked this.

This interpretation of 5:37 is arguably able to combine some of the valid features in earlier interpretations of Jesus' statement, while also avoiding some of their weaknesses. The interpretation acknowledges past revelations to Israel, explains the provocative allusion to Deut 4:12, comes to terms with the denials in John that God has previously been seen, fits the immediate context; captures the polemical nature of Jesus' statement, and highlights the discourse of seeing and hearing in John.

Notes

- 1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a seminar entitled "Picturing the New Testament," which was held in the honor of Prof. Dr. Reidar Hvalvik, on the occasion of his 65th birthday. I thus dedicate this essay to him, in grateful appreciation of all he has done as author, researcher, teacher, and colleague – and also in thankful recognition of him as my own *Doktorvater*.
- 2 For a helpful overview, see Reimund Bieringer, "Ihr habt weder seine Stimme gehört noch seine Gestalt je gesehen": Antijudaismus und johanneische Christologie," in *Studies in the Gospel of John and its Christology: Festschrift Gilbert van Belle* (ed. J. Verheyden et al.; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 265; Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 165–88.
- 3 For a more general discussion about hearing and seeing in John, focusing on how these motifs relate to coming to faith, see Craig Koester, "Hearing, Seeing and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Biblica* 70 (1989): 327–48.
- 4 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1953), 266. Similarly, also Johannes Beutler, *Martyria: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 10; Frankfurt a.M.: Josef Knecht, 1972), 261.
- 5 Rudolf Bultmann argues that this is not a typically biblical assumption. See "θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε (Joh 1,18)," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 29 (1930): 169–93 (180–83). Marianne M. Thompson argues that this is not the view of John, see *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 112–16.
- 6 J. D. Atkins, "The Trial of the People and the Prophet: John 5:30–47 and the True and False Prophet Traditions," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75 (2013): 279–96 (295).
- 7 In 5:34 Jesus explains that he speaks as he does in order to save the Jews, but this comment functions to characterize Jesus' intentions, not the worth of his interlocutors.
- 8 Urban C. von Wahlde, "The Witnesses to Jesus in John 5:31–40 and Belief in the Fourth Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 385–404 (393), correctly notes that many of the key themes in 5:31–47 reappear in chapter 8.
- 9 On the notion of spiritual blindness, see Judith Lieu, "Blindness in the Johannine Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 83–95.
- 10 Alica D. Myers thus writes "[...] the Father himself 'has testified' on his behalf. Yet, because his opponents do not know the Father, they cannot recognize the sent one in spite of the powerful, divine testimony before them" ("Jesus Said to Them...": The Adaption of Juridical Rhetoric in John 5:19–47," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 [2013]: 415–30 [423], doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/23488020>). More generally on the motif of recognizing Jesus, see Kasper Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (BIS 93; Leiden: Brill, 2008), doi: <http://>

- dx.doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004166905.i-265.
- 11 Generally on the motif of seeing Jesus, see Clemens Hergenröder, *Wir schauen seine Herrlichkeit: Das johanneische Sprechen vom Sehen im Horizont von Selbsterschließung Jesu und Antwort des Menschen* (Forschung zur Bibel 80; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1996).
 - 12 Wahld, “Witnesses.”
 - 13 The first section in Severino Pancaro’s study on the Law in John (*The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity According to John* [NovTSup 42; Leiden: Brill, 1975]) is thus aptly called: “The Law as a Norm the Jews Vainly Try to Use Against Jesus in Order to Judge and Condemn him.”
 - 14 Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (New Testament Library; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 134: “Three statements – you have never heard his voice, you have never seen his form, you do not have his word dwelling in you (vv. 37–38) – evoke, apparently by denying, the traditions of God’s speaking the law to Israel at Sinai.” For a detailed discussion, see Pancaro, *Law*, 220–30.
 - 15 Translations from the New Testament are my own, while other biblical quotations follow NABRE.
 - 16 Symmachus has $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\nu$ in Deut 4:12. See Field’s online version of Origen’s *Hexapla*, ad loc., <https://archive.org/stream/origenhexapla01unknuoft#page/278/mode/2up>.
 - 17 Knut Holter has convincingly argued that Deut 4 as a whole is designed as a comment on the second commandment, see *Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment* (Studies in Biblical Literature 60; New York: Peter Lang, 2003).
 - 18 Some interpreters (e.g. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010], 330) suggest that the Jews would have agreed that they had never seen God, but that they would have been offended by the claim that they had not heard his voice.
 - 19 Moses is said to have spoken with God face to face (Exod 33:11; Num 12:8; Deut 34:10), and he is also said to have seen God (Exod 24:9–10). In later Jewish tradition, Moses is even imagined to have had a heavenly vision on Sinai (Philo, *Moses* 1.158; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.96; Sir 45:5). On traditions about God manifesting himself at Sinai, and how this functioned to legitimize the Torah, see Wayne Meeks, “Moses as God and King,” in *Religions in Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354–71.
 - 20 This reading is proposed by Jürgen Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (2 vols.; ÖTK 4/1–2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1979–1981), 1:254–55.
 - 21 Thus Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965), 151; Nils A. Dahl, “The Johannine Church and History,” in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1974), 99–119 (109); Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 262; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 291.
 - 22 Bieringer, “‘Ihr habt weder seine Stimme gehört’” [see n. 2], 165–88. Bieringer emphasizes the shift from defence to accusation.
 - 23 Becker, *Johannes*, 1:251. Becker emphasizes the Scripture-theme.
 - 24 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:222–23; Michaels, *John* [see n. 18], 306–7; Jean Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium: Übersetzt und erklärt* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 232, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13109/9783666516382>. These writers emphasize the witness-theme.
 - 25 A similar structure is suggested in NA, 27th ed.
 - 26 Some of the suggestions are Jesus’ baptism, his transfiguration or the internal testimony of the Father in those who believe (cf. 1 John 5:9–10). The latter is suggested by Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1962), 222. For discussion of different alternatives, see Brown, *John*, 1:227–28.
 - 27 George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 78.
 - 28 Zumstein, *Johannes*, 235.
 - 29 Rudolf Schnackenburg agrees that God’s testimony encompasses both the works of Jesus and the Scriptures, but he does not relate this specifically to the distinction in 5:37 between hearing and seeing. See *The Gospel According to St John* (3 vols.; Herder Theological Commentary; London: Burns & Oates, 1982), 2:124.
 - 30 This interpretation is strengthened by the assumption that the $\kappa\alpha\iota$ with which 5:37 begins should be understood as drawing a conclusion from 5:36, rather than as adding a new point.

- The καὶ could thus be translated “and so.” Thus Michaels, *John* [see n. 18], 329.
- 31 We thus presuppose that the phrase primarily refers to the Scriptures. Thus also Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:124. For a different view, see Zumstein, *Johannes* [see n. 24], 235.
- 32 The perfect tense of μεμαρτύρηκεν (5:37) should not be taken to imply that this is solely an event in the past. See discussion in von Wahlde, “Witnesses” [see n. 8], 388.
- 33 Rudolf Bultmann comes close to this proposal when he writes: “The double witness in vv. 36, 37a is paralleled by the double reproach in vv. 37b, 38a: God is completely hidden from the Jews; they have no access to him. Thus they cannot understand the witness of the works, nor do they really know the word of God which encounters them in the Scripture to speak to them and so they do not understand the witness of the Scripture” (*The Gospel According to John* [trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1971], 266–67). However, Bultmann does not use this observation as a basis for interpreting the relationship between the Sinai revelation and the Christ-event, or the nature of the allusion to Deut 4:12.
- 34 How John would have read the apparently affirmative statements in Scripture regarding God’s visual manifestation at Sinai (e.g. Exod 24:9–10; Deut 5:24) is difficult to know. It seems plausible, however, that John would have interpreted such passages as testifying to an indirect vision of God, in which God was visually manifested, but where God himself was not seen. For evidence of such interpretations of Scriptural theophanies, see Thompson, *God* [see n. 5], 112.
- 35 Anthony Hanson, “John I. 14–18 and Exodus XXXIV,” *New Testament Studies* 23 (1976): 90–101.
- 36 A detailed argument in support of the view that 1:18a, with its denial that God has been seen, refers to the Sinai revelation, is found in Ole Jakob Filtvedt, “The Transcendence and Visibility of the Father in the Gospel of John,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* (forthcoming [2017]).
- 37 For elaborate discussion, see Daniel J. Brendsel, “Isaiah Saw His Glory”: *The Use of Isaiah 52–53 in John 12* (BZNW 208; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110365047>.
- 38 Thus also Bultmann, *John*, 267. For discussion, see Zumstein, *Johannes* [see n. 24], 236.
- 39 Ulrich Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Übersetzt und erklärt* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 123.
- 40 “[...] the Jews miss the testimony offered them in Jesus’ actions, and, therefore, they fail to see the Father’s authority manifested in the healing” (Myers, “Jesus Said to Them” [see n. 10], 423).
- 41 On Jesus as apocalyptic seer in John, see Beutler, *Martyria* [see n. 4], 307–38.
- 42 This reading of John 6 is significantly developed in Filtvedt, “Transcendence and Visibility.”
- 43 See, however 7:21–24.
- 44 On the hermeneutical significance of these verses, see Ferdinand Hahn, “Sehen und Glauben im Johannesevangelium,” in *Studien zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, *Grundsatzfragen, Jesusforschung, Evangelien* (WUNT 191; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 521–37.
- 45 On the relationship between the healings in chapter 5 and 9, see Klaus Scholtissek, “Mündiger Glaube: Zur Architektur und Pragmatik johanneischer Begegnungsgeschichten, Joh 5 und Joh 9,” in *Paulus und Johannes: Exegetische Studien zur paulinischen und johanneischen Theologie und Literatur* (ed. D. Sänger and U. Mell; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 75–105.
- 46 These verses echo 7:3–4, where the relationship between sight and ἔργα is also significant, but utterly misconstrued by Jesus’ brothers.
- 47 On the motif of reciprocal immanence in John, see Klaus Scholtissek, *In ihm sein und bleiben: Die Sprache der Immanenz in den johanneischen Schriften* (HBS 21; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2000).
- 48 There is a text-critical difficulty in 14:7, and the verse could be read either as being conditional (*had* you known me) or indicative (*since* you know me). See discussion in Brown, *John* [see n. 24], 2:621. For our purposes, it is not necessary to decide which reading is more original. The quotation above follows NA, 27th ed.
- 49 The meaning of the phrase ἄρ’ ἄρτι is contested. Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 494, interprets the phrase to mean “a situation that has already existed.” However, Frey correctly underlines that the phrase probably refers to Jesus’ hour, and its lasting effects for the post-Easter period, see *Die Johanneische Eschatologie* (3 vols.; WUNT 96, 110, 117; Tübingen:

- Mohr Siebeck, 1997–2000), 3:156. The perfect tense of ἐωράκατε (14:7) does not refer to a time in the narrative past in John (pace Ridderbos, *John*, 494), but to a “bleibend Vor-Augen-Haben” that extends also to readers of the gospel (Frey, *Eschatologie*, 3:156 n. 176).
- 50 Thompson, *God* [see n. 5], 114.
- 51 Many interpreters still paraphrase 14:9 in terms of seeing some divine attribute, such as the truth, glory or grace of God. E.g. Beasley-Murray, *John* [see n. 27], 253.
- 52 This is helpfully demonstrated by Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (2nd ed.; HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 624.
- 53 This is a strong argument against those who question whether John posits a development vis-à-vis the Old Testament, when it comes to seeing God (e.g. Thompson, *God*, 112–16).
- Thus, for instance, Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:659: “Jesus’ disciples, like Moses of old, get to see part of God’s glory.”
- 54 That the term ἔργον can be used of Jesus’ words is clear from 14:10.
- 55 On how the hour of glorification relates to seeing Jesus, see Johannes Beutler, “Greeks Come to See Jesus (John 12,20f),” *Biblica* 71 (1990): 333–47.
- 56 On δόξα in John, see Nicole Chibici-Revneanu, *Die Herrlichkeit des Verherrlichten: Das Verständnis der δόξα im Johannesevangelium* (WUNT II/231; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).
- 57 Note that similar statements are *not* found regarding Jesus’ signs.