The Noetic Turn in Jewish Thought

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Abstract
The noetic turn—perhaps the most important development in Jewish theological discourse after that from prophetic literature to apocalypticism—denotes the translation of the biblical and particularly apocalyptic ontological and epistemological categories, generally conceived according to the norms and categories of everyday knowledge, into noetic categories. God, his throne, light, angels and heavens are re-conceived from a noetic perspective. Noetic perception takes the place of direct vision, hearing and dreams in apprehending the heavenly mysteries of the apocalyptic literature. The noetic turn introduces new ontological layers and degrees in heaven, new doctrines regarding the levels of divine concealment and manifestation and new theories about human epistemic capacities. This turn exerts a momentous influence on philosophically educated authors of Jewish and Christian cultures, on such classics as Philo, Clement, Origen, Halevi, Maimonides and Gersonides and many other thinkers of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Keywords
Judaism, noetic turn, apocalypse, vision, merkavah, intellect

1. Introduction
One of Philo of Alexandria’s accounts of a visio Dei begins with the following description of the ascent of the intellect to heaven:

Next, it [i.e., the mind, νοῦς] is lifted on high (πηνοὸς ὀρθείς) and, after exploring the air and the phenomena that occur in it, it is borne further upwards (ἀνωτέρω φέρεται) towards the ether and the revolutions of heaven. Then, after being carried around in the dances of the planets and fixed stars in accordance with the laws of perfect music, and following the guidance of its
love of wisdom, it peers beyond the sense-perceptible reality (πᾶσαν τὴν αἰσθητὴν οὐσίαν ὑπερκύψας) and desires to attain intelligible realm (τῆς νοητῆς). (Philo, Opif. 70)¹

The text continues by describing the noetic entities contemplated in the intelligible world, namely the noetic paradigms of the sensible things (αἰσθητῶν ἐν ἐκείνῃ τὰ παραδείγματα καὶ τὰς ἰδέας θεασάμενος) and, at the end of the entire spiritual journey, the encounter with the Great King himself (ἀυτὸν τὸν μέγαν βασιλέα), God (Opif. 71). The account reflects the main lines of an ascension similar to those of the apocalyptic literature where the visionary journeys in the heights beyond the confines of the visible world. It is there that the apocalyptic seer contemplates the heavenly king on his throne and enjoys the vision of the divine glory and of the countless hosts of angelic beings glorifying and serving God.²

According to one of Martha Himmelfarb’s observations, the category of ascension involves an emblematic turn from prophetic to apocalyptic narrative. Unlike the prophets, who receive the divine vision within a terrestrial environment, apocalyptic seers ascend to the heavenly temple: “Ezekiel is the only one of all the classical prophets to record the experience of being physically transported by the spirit of God, but even Ezekiel does not ascend to heaven.”³ Modern scholars have also investigated the ontologies and epistemologies present in the apocalyptic literature and emphasized the heavenly temple as a central category of this literature.⁴


⁴) E.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Cultic Language in Qumran and the New Testament,” CBQ 18 (1976): 159-77; Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven: A Study of Apoc-
Nevertheless, there is something more in Philo’s passage, as in many other passages I will investigate in the following lines. The Alexandrian operates with a more refined language which allows him to make more precise ontological and epistemological descriptions. To put it briefly, employing a Greek philosophical language, Philo is able to qualify the heavenly realities of the biblical and apocalyptic theology through noetic terminology, then to distinguish the noetic nature of those entities which

inhabit heaven and those noetic capacities a human being needs in order to access that particular realm.

While Himmelfarb points out the passage from prophetic to apocalyptic discourse, I would like to propose a theory which may be the next important turn in Jewish religious thought, a theory regarding a conceptual and linguistic phenomenon which I call the “noetic turn.” Arguably one of the most important paradigm shifts of late antiquity, if not the most important in terms of theological vocabulary and conceptual instruments, the noetic turn denotes the translation of the ontological and epistemological categories of the apocalyptic discourse into noetic categories.

The noetic turn should also be explained against the Platonic distinction between the noetic (intellectual, invisible) and the aesthetic (sensible, sense-perceptible, visible). For Plato, intellectual perception already represented a particular epistemic capacity associated exclusively with the noetic or invisible realities. Noesis, therefore, should not be understood as a mere

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5) It may be argued that the turn is actually from both the biblical and apocalyptic ontology and epistemology to the noetic perspective. However, keeping in mind Himmelfarb’s distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic ontologies and the fact that Philo also places the divine temple in heavens and invests ascension as the main method of accessing the divine, it seems, consequently, more accurate to affirm that the noetic turn represents a transformation of the apocalyptic mindset and vocabulary (in both biblical and extrabiblical texts).

6) While Aristotle is generally correct when he affirms that the pre-socratics did not make the distinction between noesis and aisthesis (see De an. III. 427a; Metaph. 1009b)—because they had not yet connected the noesis with an object of thought more subtle than matter—it is also true that Heraclitus and particularly Parmenides expressed serious reservations regarding sense-perception and proposed nous or noesis as a higher epistemic capacity, more appropriate in the search of the truth; cf. Francis F. Peters, “Nóēsis (Intuition),” “Noētón (Object of the intellect),” “Nous (Intellect, Mind),” in his Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon (New York: NYU Press, 1970), 121-39. It is Plato, however, who associates episteme (the true knowledge) with noesis and noetic and invisible ideas, in opposition with doxa (the opinion), aisthesis (sense-perception) and sensible things; e.g., Phaed. 478a-480a; 508a-511d; Tim. 27. The distinction will remain essential for middle Platonists, Hellenizing Jewish and Christian thinkers such as Philo, Clement or Origen, and later Neo-Platonists. Aristotle, in spite of placing the Platonic forms within things, still conceives of the nous as the faculty of true knowledge (episteme) which holds intelligible things (ta noeta) and forms (ta eide) as the objects of investigation. In contradistinction, as he shows in De an. 431b17-432a14, sense-perception (aisthesis) remains the faculty proper to sensible things (ta aistheta).

7) See, for instance, Plato, Rep. 476a-480a; 508a-511d. E.g. Rep. 508b-c (trans. C. D. C. Reeve; Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 204: “What the latter [i.e., the good] is in the intelligible realm (ἐν τῷ νοητῷ τόπῳ) in relation to understanding (πρὸς τὸ νοῶν) and intelligi-
process within the mind. Such an understanding would be entirely à rebours to the manner in which the Greek philosophers, and later the Hellenistic thinkers from Philo to many Christian authors, conceived of this capacity. Not only a pure event of the mind, noesis was, especially in religious discourses, the particular epistemic capacity able to perceive such divine and impalpable realities as God, angels, souls, or the heavenly glory. Those realities apprehended through noesis were, therefore, noetic, extrinsic to, and independent from, the human mind.

In what concerns the ontological aspect of the noetic turn, the identification of God with the Nous represents a definite paradigm already encountered in Xenophanes (for instance, frg. A 1), Pythagoras (frg. B 15), Anaxagoras (frg. A 48), Archelaos (frg. A 12), or Democritus (frg. A 74). In Philebus, Plato ascribes to the cause (τὸ ἄιτιον) which brings everything into being such a diversity of titles as productive agent (τὸ ποιοῦν; 26e7), demiurgic agent (τὸ δημιουργοῦν; 27b1) and Nous (28d8). The Nous governs the universe (30c, 30d8) and actually represents Zeus’ intellect (30d). Aristotle will further define God in noetic terms, since the first mover (πρῶτον κινοῦν) will be characterized as a god and divine intellect, and its main activity (ἐνέργεια) as νόησις (Metaph. 1072b).

9) For the Greek text, see Platonis Opera (ed. I. Burnet; 5 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). Timaeus reflects a similar perspective, since in this dialogue the maker (ὁ ποιῶν; 31b2) of the universe also receives the titles of god (30a2; d3), Father (37c7) and again Nous (47e4).
10) See Werner Jaeger, Aristotelis Metaphysica (3d ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 253. In Eth. Nic. 1178b21-22, Aristotle defines God’s activity (ἐνέργεια) essentially as contemplative (θεωρητική) and, consequently, the highest human activity should also have the same nature; see Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea (ed. I. Bywater; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 216.
be defined as νόησις νοήσεως (Metaph. 1074b; Eth. nic. 10.1177b-1178b).\(^{11}\)

The middle Platonists and Philo will continue to develop this noetic language in connection with divine realities and divine knowledge.\(^{12}\) This language can also be encountered in other religious materials of late antiquity, such as the Hermetic Corpus and the Chaldean Oracles.

With Philo, the Platonic distinction between the noetic and the aesthetic makes its way into Jewish thought. He translates the ancient biblical and apocalyptic languages through these new categories. With this turn, the religious ontology of ancient Judaism—a God dwelling in heaven on a glorious throne surrounded by glory and myriads of angels, etc.—is transferred to the noetic realm. Once accepted in the theological discourse, the ontological distinction between the noetic and aesthetic worlds involves the epistemological distinction between the noetic and aesthetic perceptions, between noesis and aisthesis.

2. The Noetic Turn beyond the Open Heaven and the Eye of the Spirit

2.1. The Image of the Open Heaven in Scripture and Apocalyptic Materials

As Mircea Eliade and other specialists in the semantics of religious symbolisms explain, religion is always interested in reaching the core of existence, the place where God lives, the center of everything or the center as such. Seen from this perspective, religion becomes a search for the center of existence—a sacred itinerary, a pilgrimage (whether metaphorically or simply literally understood).\(^{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) It is not aleatory, then, that the highest science or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) which humans should search is the science of the divine, e.g., *Metaph.* A.983a5-7: ἡ γὰρ θειότατη καὶ τιμιωτάτη: τοιαύτη δὲ δυχῶς ἄν εἴη μόνη; ἣν τε γὰρ μάλιστ' ἂν ὁ θεός ἔχω, θείαι τῶν ἐπιστημῶν ἑστί, καὶ εἰ τῶν θείων εἴη. Cf. Aristotle, *Eth. eud.* 1249b20: τὸν θεὸν θεραπεύειν καὶ θεωρεῖν in *Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia* (ed. R. R. Walzer and J. M. Mingway; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 125.


that the prophetic method of accessing the divine—the visio Dei taking place on earth—changes to the method of ascension in apocalyptic literature. Confirming Eliade’s logic, Christopher Rowland indicates that the change of the divine indwelling from the earthly sanctuary to heaven entails the change of the method of accessing God’s glory from terrestrial vision to ascension and visio Dei in the celestial realm.\(^\text{14}\)

As Rowland also observes, the ancient biblical expression “open heaven” was frequently employed as an emblematic indicator of divine theophanies in apocalypticism or the New Testament.\(^\text{15}\) The following examples will illustrate this thesis:

Bring the whole tithe into the treasury; let there be food in my house. Put me to the proof, says the Lord of Hosts, and see if I do not open windows in the sky and pour a blessing on you as long as there is need. (Mal 3:10)\(^\text{16}\)

Then he gave orders to the skies above and threw open heaven’s doors; he rained down manna for them to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. (Ps 78:23-24)

On the fifth day of the fourth month in the thirtieth year, while I was among the exiles by the river Kebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions from God. (Ezek 1:1)

Take courage, then; for formerly you were worn out by evils and tribulations, but now you will shine like the luminaries of heaven; you will shine and appear, and the portals of heaven will be opened for you. (1 En. 104:2)\(^\text{17}\)

And I created for him [i.e., Adam] an open heaven, so that he might look upon the angels singing the triumphal song. (2 En. [J] 31:2 [OTP 1:152-54])\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{14}\) Rowland, The Open Heaven, 80. After making the observation that the usual apocalyptic cosmology presupposes the throne of glory placed in heaven, Rowland affirms: “The cosmological beliefs were such that it often became necessary for anyone who would enter the immediate presence of God to embark on a journey through the heavenly world, in order to reach God himself.”

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 78: “One of the most distinctive features of the apocalyptic literature is the conviction that the seer could pierce the vault of heaven and look upon the glorious world of God and his angels. Frequently this is expressed by the conventional expression the heavens opened (T. Levi 2:6 Greek; Acts 7:56) or the belief that a door opened in heaven (1 Enoch 14:15; Rev 4:1) to enable the seer to look and indeed at times to enter the realm above to gaze on its secrets.”

\(^\text{16}\) Unless otherwise mentioned, I will make use in this article of the Oxford Study Bible: The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha.


And while he was still speaking, behold, the expanses under me, the heavens, opened and I saw on the seventh firmament upon which I stood a fire spread out and a light and dew and a multitude of angels and a host of the invisible glory, and up above the living creatures I had seen. (Apoc. Ab. 19:4 [OTP 1:698])

And while I [Isaac] was thus watching and exulting at these things, I saw heaven opened, and I saw a light-bearing man coming down out of heaven, flashing (beams of light) more than seven suns. (T. Ab. 7:3 [OTP 1:885])

And afterward it happened that, behold, the heaven was opened, and I saw, and strength was given to me, and a voice was heard from on high. (2 Bar. 22:1 [OTP 1:629])

She said to him [i.e., Eve to Seth], “Look up with your eyes and see the seven heavens opened, and see with your eyes how the body of your father lies on its face, and all the holy angels are with him, praying for him and saying, ‘Forgive him, O Father of all, for he is your image.’” (Apoc. Mos. 35:2 [OTP 2:289])

And behold there came suddenly a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love and in whom I have pleasure, and my commandments…” And there came a great and exceeding white cloud over our heads and bore away our Lord and Moses and Elias. And I trembled and was afraid, and we looked up and the heavens opened and we saw men in the flesh, and they came and greeted our Lord and Moses and Elias, and went into the second heaven. (Apoc. Pet. [Eth.] 17 [NTA 2:635])

As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens break open and the Spirit descend on him, like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

Then he added, “In very truth I tell you all: you will see heaven wide open and God’s angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1:51)

“Look!” he said. “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56)

He [i.e., Peter] saw heaven opened, and something coming down that looked like a great sheet of sailcloth. (Acts 10:11)

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20) Cf. “During a general baptism of the people, when Jesus too had been baptized and was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:21-22); “No sooner had Jesus been baptized and come up out of the water than the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove to alight on him” (Matt 3:16).
After this I had a vision: a door stood opened in heaven, and the voice that I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place hereafter.” (Rev 4:1)

I saw heaven wide opened, and a white horse appeared; its rider’s name was Faithful and True, for he is just in judgment and just in war. (Rev 19:11)

Employing the Platonic distinction between the noetic and the aesthetic, I would regard the expression the “open heaven” as aesthetic or literal, in order to distinguish it from the noetic discourse. In this aesthetic way, the expression the “open heaven” presupposes a firmament similar to that of the Genesis narrative (Gen 1), as a curtain separating heaven and earth, and also presupposing the possibility for this firmament to be open as a curtain. Unlike the aesthetic perspective present in the Bible and apocalyptic writings, Philo advances the Platonic distinction between the sense-perceptible and the noetic. This distinction does not presuppose a heavenly firmament to be open and crossed, but requires the acquisition of a special epistemic capacity, the noetic perception, the only one able to undertake the passage from the sensible to the noetic realm.

2.2. The Eye of the Spirit: An Intermediary Stage between Biblical Epistemology and Philo’s Noetic Perception?

While the author of 1 Enoch already talks about the opening of the eyes as an epistemic condition for the vision of God (for instance, 1 En. 1:2 and 89-91, an expression which also occurs in Ascen. Isa. 6:6), certain other texts make use of a phrase which changes the whole instrument of perception from ordinary sight to something more spiritual: the “eye of spirit.” This phrase appears for example in: “And I saw the Great Glory while the eyes of my spirit were open, but I could not thereafter see, nor the angel who (was) with me, nor any of the angels whom I had seen worship my Lord” (Ascen. Isa. 9:37 [OTP 2:172]).

21) Heavens are also open to allow the rain to descend from the heavenly stores, as for example, Gen 7:11, Deut 28:12, and 2 Bar. 10:11 show. In 1 En. 33-36, the stars, winds, dew, rain and cold come forth through the gates of heaven. Likewise, 1 En. 72-76 informs us about the gates of the stars, sun, moon, winds, cold, draught, frost, locusts and desolation. Cf. 2 En. 6:1; 13:3; 14:2.

22) For the critical text, see Paolo Bettio et al., eds., Ascensio Isaiae: Textus (CC; Series apocryphorum 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995). Ascen. Isa. 6:6 and 9:37 come from the section of the text called “the Vision,” which was probably produced in the second century C.E., according to Knibb (OTP 2:150). The expression is further remarkable since Philo himself
The dream represents another visionary epistemic capacity distinct from sensible sight, a way of perceiving the heavenly realities. It is already present in such theophanies as those of Gen 20:6-7, 1 Kgs 3:4-15, 1 Sam 3 and 1 En. 13:8: “And look, dreams came upon me, and visions fell upon me. And I saw visions of wrath, and there came a voice, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of heaven to reprimand them.’” Chapters 83-90 of the first Enochic corpus, also called Enoch’s Dream Visions, relate a large variety of visionary experiences which the apocalyptic hero receives in the oneiric condition.

In contradistinction to the traditional ways of envisioning the epistemic access to divine realities (the open heaven, direct vision, dream vision, vision through the eye of the spirit etc.), Philo will propose the noetic or intellectual perception, the noesis.

3. Philo and the Emergence of the Noetic Turn in Jewish Thought

While Aristobulus reckoned that God is everywhere present in the universe and his power is manifested through all things (μόνος ὁ θεός ἐστι καὶ διὰ πάντων ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ φανερὰ γίνεται), the concepts of noetic world and noetic perception do not appear in the extant fragments attributed to him. The noetic turn was simply not part of his mindset. When Aristobulus offers a definition of the nous as the “eye of the soul” (Opif. 53). The Enochic book of Dream Visions (1 En 83-89) and its later additions (1 En 91:1-11,18,19; 92; 94-104) appears to constitute a corpus of second century B.C.E. materials (164-160 B.C.E.), according to Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 1 Enoch, 9. 23) 1 En. 13:8 (Nickelsburg and VanderKam, 33). For a scholarly analysis of the idea of dream theophany, see, for example, Robert Gnuse, The Dream Theophany of Samuel (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), 140; R. Fidler, “The Dream Theophany in the Bible” (in Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1996); Jean-Marie Husser, Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1999); Flannery-Dailey, Dreamers, Scribes; idem, “Lessons on Early Jewish Apocalypticism and Mysticism from Dream Literature,” in Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism (ed. A. DeConick; SBLSS 11; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 231-47. For the Near Eastern background of this visionary method, see A. Leo Oppenheim, The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956).

24) Aristobulus in Eusebius, Praep. ev. 8.9.5 (GCS 43/1:444). He most likely took over the idea of a governing power from the Orphic Sacred Discourse, as one can see in Praep. ev. 13.12.4-5 (GCS 43/2:191-93). Regarding the date of composition, A. Yarbro Collins suggests that “the later part of the reign of Philometor (155-145 B.C.E.) thus seems to be
bulus illustrates the human encounter with God and a visio Dei, he does not mention the noetic perception, but rather describes the event as a luminous descent. Thus, he represents the paradigmatic Sinai theophany as a divine descent (κατάβασις θεία) and a fiery occurrence, gigantic and everywhere present (διὰ πάντων μεγαλειώτητα), without combusting the burning bush, nor anything on earth.25 From an epistemological perspective, there is no indication that the spectators of this luminous theophany made use of other epistemic capacities than their ordinary sight. Aristobulus informs us that not only Moses, but the whole Hebrew people contemplated this energy of God (πάντες θεωρήσωσι τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ θεοῦ),26 and he emphasizes that all were witnesses of the great theophany (τὸ τοὺς συνορῶντας ἐμφαντικῶς ἑκάστα καταλαμβάνειν).27

It is, however, in Philo of Alexandria in the first century C.E. that we find for the first time a coherently developed noetic ontology and a noetic epistemology. Philo gives us the following definition of the intellect: “for what the intellect (νοῦς) is in the soul, this is what the eye is in the body; for each of them sees (βλέπει), in the one case the objects of thought (τὰ νοητά), in the other the objects of perception (τὰ αἰσθητά).”28 The intellect (also called reason, λόγος, in Det. 83 and Post. 53) is further described as a special gift (ἐξαίρετον γέρας) from God (Deus 45; cf. 47), a fragment of the Deity (Somn. 1.34), a ruler of the soul and a sort of god of the body (Opif. 69; Agr. 57). It is the image of the divine and invisible being (that is, God; Plant. 18) and the only faculty through which we can comprehend God (Ebr. 108). Its essence, however, remains unintelligible and unknown to us (Mut. 10). Operating with ontological and epistemological categories that come from Plato’s Timaeus 27, Philo articulates a doctrine of the intellect as the power of the soul able to perceive, beyond the sensible universe, something of the noetic world. While deploring the impious doctrine of an unproductive God (a vast inactivity [πολλὴ

25) Ibid. 8.10.17 (GCS 43/1:453-454). This descent does not have a particular location because God is everywhere (ὥστε τὴν κατάβασιν μὴ τοπικὴν εἶναι, πάντῃ γάρ ὁ θεός ἐστιν; ibid. 8.10.12-14 [GCS 43/1:453]).
26) Ibid. 8.10.12 (GCS 43/1:453).
27) Ibid. 8.10.17 (GCS 43/1:454).
28) Philo, Opif. 53. Philo also compares the nous with “the sight of the soul (ψυχῆς γὰρ ὁπτὶς), illuminated by rays peculiar to itself” (Deus 46).
ἀπραξία) and defending the theory of a divine active cause (δραστήριον αἴτιον)—the Mind of the universe (ὁ τῶν ὅλων νοῦς)—Philo employs the following distinctions:

But the great Moses considered that what is ungenerated (τὸ ἀγένητον) was of a totally different order from that which was visible (ἀλλοτριώτατον τοῦ ὁρατοῦ), for the entire sense-perceptible realm (τὸ αἰσθητόν) is in a process of becoming and change (ἐν γενέσει καὶ μεταβολαῖς) and never remains in the same state. So to what is invisible and intelligible (τὸ ὑώρατο καὶ νοητῷ) he assigned eternity (ἀιδιότητα) as being akin and related to it, whereas on what is sense-perceptible he ascribed the appropriate name becoming. (Opif. 12)

The text shows, therefore, that, according to Philo and following Plato, there are two worlds (the noetic and the sensible) and two corresponding epistemic capacities (the intellect [νοῦς] and the sense-perception [αἴσθησις]):

For God, because he is God, understood in advance that a beautiful copy (μίμημα) would not come into existence apart from a beautiful model (παραδείγματος), and that none of the objects of sense-perception (τι τῶν αἰσθητῶν) would be without fault, unless it was modeled (ἀπεικονισθῇ) on the archetypal (ἀρχέτυπον) and intelligible idea (νοητὴν ἱδέαν). Therefore, when he had decided to construct this visible cosmos (τὸν ὁρατὸν κόσμον), he first marked out the intelligible cosmos (τὸν νοητὸν), so that he could use it as a incorporeal and most god-like (ἀσωμάτῳ καὶ θεοειδεστάτῳ) paradigm (παραδείγματι) and so produce the corporeal cosmos (τὸν σωματικόν), a younger likeness (ἀπεικόνισμα) of an older model, which would contain as many sense-perceptible kinds (αἰσθητά) as there were intelligible kinds (νοητά) in that other one... Then, taking up the imprints of each object in his own soul like in wax, he [i.e., the architect] carries around the intelligible city (νοητὴν πόλιν) as an image in his head. Summoning up the representations by means of his innate power of memory and engraving their features (τοὺς χαρακτῆρας) even more distinctly (on his mind), he begins, as a good builder, to construct the city out of stones and timber, looking at the model (τὸ παράδειγμα) and ensuring that the corporeal objects correspond to each of the incorporeal ideas (τῶν ἁσωμάτων ἱδεῶν). The conception we have concerning God must be similar to this, namely that when he had decided to found the great cosmic city, he first conceived its outlines (τύπους). Out of these he composed the intelligible cosmos (κόσμον νοητόν), which served...
him as a model (παραδείγματι) when he completed the sense-perceptible cosmos (τὸν αἰσθητὸν) as well. (Opif. 16-19)\(^{29}\)

The noetic nature of the two agents of this double creation—God and his Logos—is also an intrinsic part of this theological scheme.\(^{30}\) While God the Father is the real Demiurge (ποιητής; Opif. 21), his Logos plays the role of the “instrument” by which God creates the world (Cher. 127; Abr. 6) and also of the noetic “place,” in fact the very noetic cosmos where God draws the intelligible or eidetic project of creation:

Just as the city that was marked out beforehand in the architect had no location (χώραν) outside, but had been engraved in the soul of the craftsman, in the same way the cosmos composed of the ideas (ὁ ἐκ τῶν ἱδεῶν κόσμος) would have no other place (τόπον) than the divine Logos (τὸν θείον λόγον) who gives these (ideas) their ordered disposition. (Opif. 20)

If you would wish to use a formulation that has been stripped down to essentials, you might say that the intelligible cosmos (νοητὸν κόσμον) is nothing else than the Logos of God as he is actually engaged in making the cosmos (θεοῦ λόγος ἠδή κοσμοποιοῦντος). (Opif. 24)

The double creation theory and the idea that the noetic paradigms are placed within the Logos recur in De opificio in a passage that calls the noetic world in addition, incorporeal:

Now that the incorporeal cosmos (ἀσώματος κόσμος) had been completed and established in the divine Logos (ἐν τῷ θείῳ λόγῳ), the sense-perceptible cosmos (ὁ αἰσθητός) began to be formed as a perfect offspring, with the incorporeal serving as model (πρὸς παράδειγμα τούτου). (Opif. 36)\(^{31}\)

\(^{29}\) The distinction is operative as well in other passages, for example Leg. 1.1: “For using symbolical language he [i.e., Moses] calls the mind (νοῦν) heaven, since heaven is the abode of natures discerned only by mind (αἱ νοηταὶ φύσεις), but sense-perception (αἴσθησιν) he calls earth, because sense-perception possesses a composition of a more earthly and body-like (σωματοειδῆ καὶ γεωδεστέραν) sort.”

\(^{30}\) God himself is called the mind of the world (τοῦ τῶν ὅλων νοῦ) in several places, e.g. Leg. 3.29; Abr. 4 and 192. Most likely, the idea appears for the first time in Thales, frg. A 23: νοῦν τοῦ κόσμου τοῦ θεόν (Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, 1:78).

\(^{31}\) The term “incorporeal” is also used as synonymous with noetic in various other passages where Philo employs the term “invisible” as synonymous with noetic; e.g. Opif. 29: “First, therefore, the maker made an incorporeal (ἀσώματον) heaven and an invisible (ἀόρατον) earth and a form of air and of the void (ιέρος ἱδέαν καὶ κενὸν). To the former he assigned the name darkness, since the air is black by nature, to the latter the name abyss, because the
The passage is significant in its confirmation that the term “incorporeal” (ἀσώματος) refers not to entities deprived completely of real existence—pure abstractions—but rather clearly, and repeatedly, to a noetic sort of existence. This existence is more subtle than aesthetic realities, although not completely immaterial.

According to the Alexandrian, the entire reality is actually constituted of various degrees of materiality and noetic levels. God is the mind of the universe and dwells in his Logos. The divine Logos itself, as an intelligible reality per se, is everywhere present in the visible universe through his two powers, which Philo calls either “goodness” and “authority” (Cher. 28), or “God” and “Lord” (Mos. 2.99). He also talks about a heavenly intelligible light, kindled before the sun and the source of light for all sensible luminaries: sun, moon, stars, planets, etc. (Opif. 33). Unlike the luminaries, the heavenly light remains perceptible only through the intellect. Nevertheless, this light does not seem to be a simple eidetic paradigm of every possible luminary, a mere Platonic abstract Idea, since it is a real substance which procures the visible light of all the luminaries.

Philo thus conceives of certain mediating elements between the intelligible and sensible universes. These elements can trespass from one world into the other, especially from the immaterial into the material. In a certain way, they represent a revelation of the upper world. Morning and evening, for instance, although they cross the Limit or Boundary (Horos) of heaven and enter the sensible world, are described as incorporeal and noetic entities, since only the intellect can perceive them (Opif. 34). Likewise, intelligible air, which is the intellect, may change their subtle constitutions into heavier materialities and provide the air (that is, life) and light of the visible world:

Both spirit (πνεῦμα) and light were considered deserving of a special privilege. The former he named of God, because spirit is highly important for life (ζωτικότατον) and God is the cause of life. Light he describes as exceedingly beautiful, for the intelligible (τὸ νοητὸν) surpasses the visible (τὸ ὁρατόν) in brilliance and brightness just as much, I believe, as sun surpasses darkness, day surpasses night, and intellect (νοῦς), which gives leadership to the entire soul, surpasses its sensible sources of information, the eyes of the body. That void is indeed full of depths and gaping. He then made the incorporeal being (ἀσώματον οὐσίαν) of water and of spirit, and as seventh and last of all of light, which once again was incorporeal and was also the intelligible model (ἀσώματον ἰν καὶ νοητὸν… παράδειγμα) of the sun and all the other light-bearing stars which were to be established in heaven.”
invisibile and intelligible light (τὸ δὲ ἀόρατον καὶ νοητὸν φῶς) has come into being as image (εἰκών) of the divine Logos which communicated its genesis. It is a star that transcends the heavenly realm (ὑπερουράνιος ἀστήρ), source of the visible stars (πηγὴ τῶν εἰσιθητῶν ἁστέρων), and you would not be off the mark to call it “allbrightness” (παναύγεια). From it (ἀφ ἧς) the sun and moon and other planets and fixed stars draw (ἀρύτονται) the illumination (φέγγη) that is fitting for them in accordance with the capacity they each have. But the unmixed and pure gleam has its brightness (αὐγῆς) dimmed when it begins to undergo (τρέπεσθαι) a change from the intelligible to the sense-perceptible (κατὰ τὴν ἐκ νοητοῦ πρὸς αἰσθητὸν μεταβολήν), for none of the objects in the sense-perceptible realm is absolutely pure. (Opif. 30-31)

A few epistemological remarks should be added to our discussion. As in certain biblical passages and the apocalyptic literature, Philo still maintains heaven as the preeminent geography of divine indwelling. The human being who intends to reach that realm has to ascend to those heights (Leg. 1.1). Nevertheless, in what concerns the access to that realm and the access to God, Philo advances a clearly innovative method: the noetic perception, the noesis. While still conceiving of ascension as the favored method of accessing God, Philo alters the nature of this ascension. Instead of transportation to heaven, direct vision, dream vision or other methods, he has the intellect perform the ascent.

32) Stars were also heavenly beings, according to Philo, who criticized Anaxagoras’ theory that stars simply consist of fiery metal (Somn 1.22; Aet. 47). They are living beings possessing minds (Gig. 60; Plant. 12; Opif. 73) and, more than that, divine souls (Gig. 8), divine natures (Opif. 144; Prov. 2.50; QG 4.188) and a host of visible gods (Aet. 46). For further discussions, see Alan Scott, Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63-75.

33) Philo even affirms that the noetic natures are located in heaven, while the aesthetic ones are on earth. One of the conditions of possibility for the ascension to heaven is given by the Philonian assumption that the universe is arrayed as a ladder of elements, which is in fact a Stoic doctrine about the arrangement of the universe. As Allan Scott shows, Philo admits the Stoic doctrine about the array of the cosmic elements according to their weight: earth at the bottom, water above the earth, air above the water and fire on the highest level. Fire, not ether, is the true substance of heaven. (See Scott, Origen, 66. Cf. Aet. 33; 115). The doctrine presents some contradictory points since Philo also accepts the Peripatetic view—opposed to the Stoic one—according to which the ether is actually the substance of heaven (see Her. 87, 238; 240; 283; Detu 78; Mut. 179; Somn. 1.139; 145; QG 3.6). For the idea of mystical ascent in Philo, see for example Peder Borgen, Philo of Alexandria, An Exegete for His Time (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 194-205 (ch. 11: “Illegitimate and Legitimate Ascents”).
According to the Philonian pedagogical curriculum, the exercise in arts and sciences (τέχναι καὶ ἐπιστήμαι) should be followed by the itinerary of the human mind within the noetic world. The passage about the ascent of the mind given in the introduction of this paper continues in this way:

And when the intellect has observed in that realm the models and forms of the sense-perceptible things (αἰσθητῶν... τὰ παραδείγματα καὶ τὰς ἰδέας) which it had seen here, objects of overwhelming beauty, it then, possessed by a sober drunkenness, becomes enthused like the Corybants. Filled with another longing and a higher form of desire, which has propelled it to the utmost vault of the intelligibles (τῶν νοητῶν), it thinks it is heading towards the Great King himself. But as it strains to see (ἰδεῖν), pure and unmixed beams (ἄκρατοι καὶ ἀμιγεῖς αὐγαί) of concentrated light (ἀθρόου φωτός) pour forth like a torrent, so that the eye of the mind (τὸ τῆς διανοίας ὦμμα), overwhelmed by the brightness (μαρμαρυγαῖς), suffers from vertigo. (Opif. 70-71)

According to Philo, the priests and the prophets, more than scientists and ordinary people, reach the highest level of humanity and become “born of God,” an expression which means that they

have risen wholly above the sphere of sense-perception (τὸ δὲ αἰσθητὸν πᾶν ύπερκύψαντες) and have been translated into the world of the intelligible (εἰς τὸν νοητὸν κόσμον ματανέστησαν) and dwell there registered as freemen of the commonwealth of Ideas, which are imperishable and incorporeal (ἀφθάρτων καὶ ἀσωμάτων ἰδεῶν πολιτείᾳ). (Gig. 61)

4. Divine Mysteries and Noetic Perception

Previous scholars have observed that the revelation of heavenly mysteries represents an essential feature of Jewish apocalyptic literature. Benjamin

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34) E.g., Congr. 11-25. As the curriculum actually has to lead to the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, philosophy has to lead to wisdom, which is the science of divine and human things (ἐπιστήμη θείων καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων [Congr. 79]).
35) See also Leg. 1.38. Beyond these passages where Philo ascribes the ascension to the mind (considered the most important part of the soul; Opif. 69), there are also passages where he talks about the ascent of the soul beyond heavens to God, e.g., QE 2.40, 47.
Gladd even argues that this paradigm of thought starts with Daniel. He further notices that mystery language in apocalyptic literature is frequently connected with three epistemic capacities specialized in perceiving the heavenly and eschatological mysteries of God, namely the true eye, ear and heart, in opposition to the ordinary eye, ear and heart.37

Philo preserves the tradition of understanding mysteries as heavenly secrets and translates it into philosophical language, operating once again a noetic turn from the biblical language. Now, the epistemic capacity which Philo deems appropriate to explore the divine mysteries is the *nous*, the noetic perception. The intellect is highly involved in the process of initiation and embodies, in fact, the key faculty of initiation: “[T]he mind (νοῦς) soars aloft and is being initiated in the mysteries (τὰ τοῦ κυρίου μυστήρια μυῆται) of the Lord.”38 Once consecrated, the mind becomes a minister and servant (ἱερωμένην διάνοιαν λειτουργὸν καὶ θεραπευτρίδα) of God, doing everything that delights the master (*Post. 184*). Long before Philo, Plato was the first to compare the ascent of the mind and the noetic vision of the Ideas with the luminous experience that the initiates in mysteries gain at the culminating point of their initiation.39 In a similar fashion, according to Philo, the itinerary the human intellect follows into the invisible and noetic realm is compared with an initiation into the divine mysteries.

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37) Gladd, *Revealing the Mysterion*, 274-77. There are also some biblical references where this type of epistemic sensory language is also used in connection with the knowledge of God, e.g., Deut 29:4; 28:45; Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2 (ibid.). They are directly connected with the idea of mystery of the kingdom, for instance in Matt 13:9-13.


While commenting on the Passover narrative from Exodus 12, Philo avers that the passage actually refers to those who overcome the realm of passions and, thus, can have a comprehension of God through his works in creation (Leg. 3.94-99). In addition, there is an even more advanced stage of initiation, namely that of the direct vision of God through the nous:

There is a mind (νοῦς) more perfect and more thoroughly cleansed, which has undergone initiation into the great mysteries (τὰ μεγάλα μυστήρια μυηθείς), a mind which gains its knowledge of the First Cause (τὸ αἴτιον γνωρίζει) not from created things (οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν γεγονότων), as one may learn the substance from the shadow (ἀπὸ σκιᾶς), but lifting its eyes above and beyond creation (ὑπερκύψας τὸ γενητὸν) obtains a clear vision of the uncreated One (ἐμφάσιν ἐναργῆ τοῦ ἁγενήτου), so as from Him to apprehend both Himself and His shadow (ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ αὐτὸν καταλαμβάνειν καὶ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ). To apprehend that was, we saw, to apprehend both the Word and this world. The mind of which I speak is Moses who says, “Manifest (Ἐμφάνισόν) Thyself to me, let me see Thee that I may know Thee” [Exod 33:13]; ‘for I would not ask that Thou shouldst be manifested (ἐμφανισθείης) to me by means of heaven or earth or water or air or any created thing at all (τινος ἁπλῶς τῶν ἐν γενέσει), nor would I find the reflection of Thy being (τὴν σὴν ἰδέαν) in aught else than in Thee Who art God, for the reflections in created things are dissolved (αἱ γὰρ ἐν γενητοῖς ἐμφάσεις διαλύονται), but those in the Uncreate (αἱ δὲ ἐν τῷ ἁγενήτῳ) will continue abiding and sure and eternal.’ (Leg. 3.100-101)

5. God’s Inaccessible Core and the Limit of Noetic Perception

Philo not only transfers the heavenly realm and the vision to the noetic level, but adds even more refinement to his discourse about the knowledge of God. An ancient biblical and apocalyptic feature, anthropomorphism is no longer a discursive tool for Philo’s refined speech and for all those thinkers who followed the noetic paradigm, from Clement and Origen to Halevi, Maimonides and Gersonides. As we have seen above, there are various degrees of divine concealment and revelation or manifestation in both noetic and visible worlds. Another particular theoretical element which seems to remain a constant feature of the entire noetic trend is the

40) See also Sacr. 63 for the definition of the Passover as the passage from passions to the practice of virtue (τὴν ἐκ παθῶν εἰς ἄσκησιν ἀρετῆς διάβασιν) and Sacr. 62 for the idea that this passage represents the “lesser mysteries” (τὰ μικρά μυστήρια).
postulation a dimension of the divine which remains impenetrable and inaccessible for the noetic perception, namely, the essence of God.

While certain anti-anthopomorphic stances are already present in Aristobulus, Philo is the real initiator of apophatic theology in its proper sense, namely that negative language usually employed to describe this inaccessible dimension of God.\(^{41}\) As Daniélou and Starobinski-Safran observed, Philo developed his apophatic terminology within the exegetical context of biblical theophanies, as for example in the apparition of God to Moses or to Abraham.\(^{42}\) In *De posteritate Caini*, while describing the wise man as always longing to comprehend the Ruler of the universe (κατανοῆσαι τὸν ἡγεμόνα τοῦ παντός), the author concludes with the next skeptical passage:

\[\text{[I]t follows, then, that not only other things with which we are familiar, but that whose movement surpasses them all in swiftness, the mind (τὸ πάντων ὀξυκινητότατον, ὁ νοῦς), would come short of the apprehension of the First Cause (τῆς καταλήψεως τοῦ αἰτίου) by an immeasurable distance (ἀπεριγράφοις... διαστήμασιν). (Post. 18-19)}\(^{43}\)

Unlike this concealed dimension of God, his external manifestation represents the accessible, knowable dimension of the divine. The “external” manifestation is God’s divine existence (ὑπάρξις), in the sense of *ek-stasis*, *ex-sistentia* (the outward manifestation of the unmanifested principle), also called God’s active power (δύναμις), glory, or rays. The following passage from *De posteritate Caini* illustrates this idea:


\[^{43}\text{See also *Mut. 6*: “And so when you hear that God was seen by man, you must think that this takes place without the light which senses know (χωρὶς φωτὸς αἰσθητοῦ), for what belongs to mind can be apprehended only by the mental powers (νοήσει γὰρ τὸ νοητὸν εἰκὸς μόνον καταλαμβάνεσθαι).” And also *Mut. 7*: “Do not however suppose that the Existent (τὸ ὄν), which truly exists (ὅ ἐστι πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὄν) is apprehended (καταλαμβάνεσθαι) by any man; for we have in us no organ (ὀργανόν) by which we can envisage it (ἐκεῖνον φαντασιωθῆναι), neither in sense (οὔτ’ αἰσθησίν), nor in mind (οὔτε νοῦν).”} \]
But the Being that in reality is (τὸ δὲ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὄν) can be perceived and known (κατανοεῖσθαι τε καὶ γνωρίζεσθαι), not only through the ears, but with the eyes of the understanding (τοῖς διανοίας οἴμασιν), from the powers that range the universe (ἐκ τῶν κατὰ τὸν κόσμον δυνάμεων), and from the constant and ceaseless motion of His ineffable works (τῶν ἀμυθήτων ἔργων). Wherefore in the great Song there come these words as from the lips of God, “See, see that I AM” (Deut 32:39), showing that He that actually is (τοῦ ὄντος ὄντος) is apprehended by clear intuition (ἀντικαταλαμβανομένου) rather than demonstrated by arguments carried on in words. When we say that the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) is visible (ὁρατὸν), we are not using words in their literal sense, but it is an irregular use of the word by which it is referred to each one of His powers. In the passage just quoted He does not say “See Me,” for it is impossible that the God who is should be perceived (κατανοηθῆναι) at all by created beings. What he says is “See that I AM,” that is “Behold My subsistence (ὕπαρξιν).” For it is quite enough for a man’s reasoning faculty to advance as far as to learn that the Cause of the Universe is and subsists (ἔστι τε καὶ ὑπάρχει). To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about essence or quality (οὐσίας ή ποιότητος) in God, is a folly fit for the world’s childhood. Not even to Moses, the all-wise, did God accord this, albeit he had made countless requests, but a divine communication was issued to him, “Thou shalt behold that which is behind Me, but my Face thou shalt not see” (Exod 33:23). This meant, that all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man’s apprehension (καταληπτά), while He Himself alone is beyond it (αὐτὸς δὲ μόνος ἀκατάλεπτος), beyond, that is, in the line of straight and direct approach, a mode of approach by which (had it been possible) His quality would have been made known; but brought within ken by the powers that follow and attend Him (τῶν ἐπομένων καὶ ἀκολούθων δυνάμεων καταληπτός); for these make evident not His essence (οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν) but His subsistence (τὴν δ’ ὑπαρξίν) from the things which He accomplishes (ἐκ τῶν ἀποτελομένων).44

As we will further see, Exod 33:23 will remain the central biblical reference for future Jewish and Christian authors regarding this vital distinction of the noetic tradition between God’s essence and his manifestations. As the text about God’s appearances follows immediately after Philo’s excursus about God’s incomprehensibility, the two ideas are strongly connected and certainly equally valid at the same time. While defending a strict apophaticism of the divine essence (ousia), the author still agrees

44 Post. 167-169. Compare with Deus 62; Fug. 165; Spec. 1.32-40; Virt. 215; Mos. 2.99-100.
that the human being can see God’s manifestation or \textit{ek-stasis}, his glory, operations, and powers.\textsuperscript{45}

\section*{6. The Noetic Turn in Its Major Lines of Development: Jewish Thought}

The noetic turn will constitute a major trend in Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The distinction between noetic and aesthetic, essential for the Platonic and Aristotelian systems, will play a similarly critical role in many philosophically inspired Jewish and Christian speculations until a new philosophical paradigm, namely, German transcendentalism from Kant to Hegel to Fichte to Schleiermacher, will inspire a new theological paradigm. In the following pages I will point out some of the most important representatives of the mainstream Jewish and Christian theological and philosophical views in order to offer the reader a glimpse of the wide extension this paradigm had in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{46} The noetic turn will re-emerge at the rise of classical Jewish philosophy and become a \textit{locus communis} in the writings of such mainstream authors as Sa’adiah, Judah Halevi, Maimonides and Gersonides.\textsuperscript{47}

As Gad Freudenthal shows, Sa’adiah Gaon, already at the beginning of the tenth century, calls God “the world’s Intellect” (‘\textit{aql al-\textsuperscript{c}alam}), an expression rendered in Hebrew as \textit{da\textsuperscript{c}at ha-\textsuperscript{c}olam u-vinat ha-\textsuperscript{c}olam}.\textsuperscript{48} This note is significant because it confirms that already in the tenth century

\textsuperscript{45} See \textit{Spec.} 1.41-49 for \textit{\textit{o}u\textit{s}ia} vs. \textit{d\textit{\acute{o}}x\textit{a}}, \textit{d\textit{\acute{y}n\textit{\acute{o}}m\textit{\acute{e}}s}, \textit{\textit{\egr{e}}g\textit{\acute{e}}\textit{mat}}. Cf. \textit{Deus} 61-62 and \textit{Somn.} 1.230-231 for the distinction between \textit{\textit{\acute{\eta}}n} and \textit{\textit{\acute{\eta}}p\textit{\acute{a}r}x\textit{\acute{e}}s}.

\textsuperscript{46} A detailed investigation of all the authors and theological and philosophical systems who developed the noetic paradigm, with all their theoretical contexts and details, would require a future investigation larger than an article.

\textsuperscript{47} To a certain extent, calling them philosophers might suggest a particular separation from theology. They were, in fact, as much theologians as Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William Occam. They wrote extensive commentaries on the Bible and, in addition to this, Sa’adiah and Maimonides were rabbis. Consequently, they were philosophically educated theologians as aforementioned Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Occam. This idea is significant because it shows us that both trends—the philosophical and the everyday biblical—coexisted in the frames of the same religious culture.

philosophically educated Jewish authors started to define God as Intellect. Freudenthal also mentions Abraham Ibn Ezra, an author of the twelfth century, who renders the same Arabic technical term for intellect ('ʿaqil) as daʿat and its derivatives in the following sentence: “Be not astonished that the Lord calls ‘the Lord,’ for He alone is an intelleting subject, an intellect, and an intelligible (yodea, we-daʿat, we-yadua).”49 Freudenthal notes that gradually, starting with the twelfth century, the term sekhel replaces the term daʿat as a technical term for the classical Aristotelian intellect.50 Judah Halevi, for instance, in Kuzari 4.3.40, affirms that “God is the spirit, soul, intellect (sekhel), and life force of this universe.”51 In the same line of thought, Maimonides defines God in Aristotelian terms as the self-cognizant intellect: “He is the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object (ואלעאקל אלעקל ואלמעקול).”52 Gersonides follows Maimonides in employing Aristotelian terminology and qualifying God as the First Intellect and noesis noeseos.53 Elliot R. Wolfson describes in great detail how Jewish medieval authors clothed the ancient merkavah tradition with the garment of Greek philosophy.54 He demonstrates very clearly that the ancient apocalyptic heavenly

50) Freudenthal, “Ketav ha-Daʿat,” 43. Freudenthal points out that even Maimonides still uses daʿat in some of his tracts; ibid., 44-45.
52) Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed 1.68 (trans. Shlomo Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 163. See also the end of the chapter, Guide 1.68 (Pines): “Now when it is demonstrated that God, may He be held precious and magnified, is an intellect in actu and that there is absolutely no potentiality in Him—as is clear and shall be demonstrated—so that He is not by way of sometimes apprehending and sometimes not apprehending but is always an intellect in actu, it follows necessarily that He and the thing apprehended are one thing, which is His essence. Moreover, the act of apprehension owing to which He is said to be an intellectually cognizing subject is in itself the intellect, which is His essence. Accordingly He is always the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object.”
53) Gersonides, The Wars of the Lord 5.3.5 (trans. S. Feldman; 3 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1984-1999), 3:137. See also Wars 5.3.12 (Feldman, 3:172): “For the intellect, the object of knowledge and the knower are necessarily numerically one, as Aristotle has proved… Thus, the First Cause knows itself, [i.e., its essence], and in knowing itself it knows all existents simultaneously in the most perfect way.”
realm is now denoted through noetic terminology. Wolfson, at first, shows that Judah Halevi describes the world of the heavenly merkavah as spiritual:

[T]he world of spiritual entities, ʿalâm al-rūḥāniyyân (ʿolam ha-ruhaniyyim), is identified with the aggadic Pardes which is understood by Halevi as the celestial throne-world. That is to say, therefore, that in this case at least the spiritual entities comprise the array of objects known from the pleroma of the merkavah mystics: the glory, the attendant angels, the chariot, and the throne.55

Halevi conceives of the biblical expression the “holy spirit” as a spiritual and ethereal substance and the “Glory of God” as a manifestation of this substance in various forms:

A very subtle physical visage may surround a spiritual (הרוחני) entity, and this is known as the “Holy Spirit.” Spiritual images called the “Glory of God” [such as that which descended upon Mount Sinai] are really made up of this visage.56

He envisions the “Glory” either as a spiritual substance taking different forms or as the whole merkavah universe:

As to the term “Glory [‘kvod’] of God”: the more literal meaning refers to the ethereal entity (הוהילא) controlled by God’s will to appear in an image, representing how God wishes to appear to the prophet. The broader meaning includes the angels and spiritual vessels, such as “the throne,” “the chariot,” “the firmament,” “the wheels,” “the wheelworks,” and other entities which exist eternally. These are thus called “Glory of God,” just as a king’s vessels (“kevudah”) are called his glory, as in “and the vessels before him.”57

Halevi makes also the distinction between the accessible part of this heavenly universe—throne, angels, to which should be added the back parts of God—and the inaccessible one, the face of God:

55) Ibid., 190-91.
56) Kuzari 2.4.3 (Korobkin). Kuzari 1.87.3 equates the Holy Spirit and the Active Intellect (הפועל השכל), while 1.1.15 identifies the Active Intellect with an angel and 1.1.20 describes it as an ethereal entity (וחזק ת ⟨). Kuzari 1.87.3 (Korobkin).
57) Kuzari 4.3.49 (Korobkin).
Perhaps this is what Moshe was referring to when he said, “Please show me Your Glory,” to which God acquiesced, provided that Moshe would not look at His face, which no mortal is able to do. [It was this Glory] to which God referred when He said, “You will see My back.” This Glory [has various components], some of which can be perceived by prophetic vision. The lowest level can be perceived even by ordinary man; the “cloud” and the “consuming fire” are two which were commonly seen. But the Glory gradually ascends in its ethereality until it reaches a level which no prophet can perceive.58

In addition, Wolfson shows that the terms “spiritual” and “intellectual” function as synonyms and denote the same celestial throne-world:

Halevi describes the fate of another rabbi who entered the Pardes, Elisha ben Abuyah, as degrading the commandments “after contemplating the Intellects (אלעקליאת).” From this context, then, it may be concluded that Halevi identified the mystical Pardes with the realm of spiritual beings which are the immaterial Intellects.59

Halevi is not unique. Wolfson mentions, too, a document which discloses the same terminology and philosophical paradigm, namely the Pseudo-Empedoclean Book of Five Substances:

In that text one reads about an “intellectual vision” (הראות השכל) through which one can know the spiritual or intelligible forms (שכליות צורות רוחניות) which are the “impressions (or traces) of God” (רשומי השי״ת) within the world of the Intellect (השכל עולם).

Maimonides also identifies the angels which move the heavenly spheres with Aristotelian separate intellects:

This is also what Aristotle says. But there is a difference in the terms; for he speaks of separate intellects (מעאריקו), and we speak of angels. . . . [T]hese separate intellects are also intermediaries between God, may He be

58) Kuzari 4.3.49-50 (Korobkin). In 4.3.12 Halevi expressly affirms that God’s essence is incomprehensible. Maimonides professes a similar opinion that Moses asks for something which is beyond human epistemic capacities, namely the essence of God; see Guide 3.9; cf. Herbert A. Davidson, Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 338 and Kellner, Maimonides Confrontation, 194-98.
60) Ibid., 193.
exalted, and the existents; and... it is through their intermediation that the spheres are in motion, which motion is the cause of the generation of the things subject to generation.61

He actually describes the heaven as a realm of separate intellects. Since the whole realm is conceived of nine hosts of angels and the Active Intellect, Maimonides depicts the heaven as consisting of ten distinct categories of intellects:

The globes are nine according to their [i.e., philosophers who followed Aristotle] reckoning; namely, the one that encompasses the universe, the sphere of the fixed stars, and the spheres of the seven planets. The tenth intellect is the Active Intellect.62

Gersonides also identifies the light of the first day of creation with the separate intellects, namely the angels.63 There is, however, a significant distinction between the noetic universes envisioned by the Greek philosophers and that of the Jewish and Christian theologians. The entities which populate the religious noetic universes are thrones, angels and glory, instead of abstract noetic ideas which function as paradigms of the things that inhabit the visible world.64

From an epistemological perspective, Jewish medieval theologians distinguish between the epistemic faculty used in a *visio Dei* and the ordinary sight. For instance, Wolfson shows that they used various synonymous expressions to denote this capacity, most of them of biblical and rabbinic origins, such as “the spiritual eye,” “the inner eye,” “the vision of the heart,”

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63) *Wars* 6.2.5 (Feldman, 3:438): “This light refers to the Separate Intelligences that are the movers of the heavenly bodies.” It is in the same chapter that he discusses whether the human intellect is able or not to apprehend this primordial light. Gersonides affirms that, unlike Rabbi Juda bar Simon who denies it, all the other Rabbis consider that the intellect can perceive this light, although not perfectly. Moreover, the apprehension of the primordial light procures immortality.

64) Wolfson mentions the existence of this idea in Jewish medieval texts: “These forms [mentioned in the *Book of the Five Substances*] are akin to the Plotinian conception of intelligibles (τὰ νοητά) within the second hypostasis, *Noûs*, that make up the intelligible world (κόσμος νοητός). Yet, for Halevi, the spiritual forms are not simply the intelligible ideas within the mind of God; they assume the character of the entities known from the world of ancient Jewish throne-mysticism” (Wolfson, “Merkavah Traditions,” 193-94).
etc. Wolfson’s conclusion is that all these expressions refer to intellectual perception:

That is to say, in the Islamic-Jewish Neoplatonic tradition the vision of the heart is an intellectual intuition of that which is incorporeal and thus invisible in a physical sense. The eye of the heart (עין הלב) is synonymous with the eye of the intellect (עין חשבל).  

This epistemic capacity, however, is restricted to the prophets and pious people, as Halevi shows:

The prophets thus undoubtedly see this Divine realm with their inner eye (עין הנשמה), and are witness to images (צורות) that are appropriate to their nature. They describe these images as if they had physically seen them. Their descriptions are correct in relation to what one’s discretion, imagination, and perception (והחוש והדמיון והחשב) perceive, but are not correct with regard to the actual entity about which they are prophesying, which is what the intellect (חשבל) seeks.

Thus, the whole Halevian analysis of the visio Dei phenomenon reaches new complexities in terms of psychological processes and explanations. Halevi and also Maimonides, postulate the existence of a prophetic faculty which perceives the heavenly realm and mediates the vision to the intellect, namely imagination. Halevi critiques the Greek philosophers who thought that this sublime contemplation could be experienced directly through the intellect alone, without the mediation of imaginative faculty:

65) Ibid., 222.
66) Kuzeri 4.3.36 (Korobkin). Cf. 4.3.34 and 37.
67) See Maimonides, Guide 2.36 (Pines, 369): “Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in its being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honoured, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection for the imaginative faculty.” A few lines later, Maimonides offers a definition of the imaginative faculty: “You know, too, the actions of the imaginative faculty that are in its nature, such as retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them. And you know that its greatest and noblest action takes place only when the senses rest and do not perform their actions. It is then that a certain overflow overflows to this faculty according to its disposition, and it is the cause of the veridical dreams. This same overflow is the cause of the prophecy” (Pines, 370).
Do not believe the philosopher who claims that his thoughts are properly attuned to the order of things to the point where he comprehends all the essential aspects of Godliness—using his intellect (בשכלו) alone, without the need for physical representations, and that all he needs to see are certain words, writings, or pictures of real or imaginary scenes... Without a physical manifestation to effectively represent all the necessary aspects of the Divine order, these ideas cannot penetrate into the intellect (השכלי).  

Jewish commentators talk about imagination because they conceive of the vision of God through a unique and momentary grasp of the intellect too close to perfection and to the way God sees everything in the universe through a unique perception of his intellect. The human intellect, of its own accord, is not able to perceive the essence of things. Such insight may be granted by a special grace, but even in that case it would be of only certain types of objects. Prophets always have a very complex vision in which all the details are received through the internal eye: “He sees in the vision all the qualities and instruments which indicate God’s ability, such as an outstretched arm, a drawn sword, fire, wind, lightening, thunder, etc.” Halevi informs his reader that the intellect does function during the vision as an epistemic faculty which combines all the details received through the imaginative powers in a unitary vision:

God granted an “internal eye” (נסתרת עין) [that is, prophecy] to a select group, which allows them to see certain fixed entities with their own eyes. In turn, their intellects (השכלי) use these visions to comprehend these entities and their internal workings... These people’s internal eyes are possibly like having the power of imagination (המדמה החכ) while the intellect is active.  

Nevertheless, as Maimonides affirms, one of the mortals actually enjoyed a visio Dei directly through the intellect, namely Moses: “the imaginative faculty did not enter into his prophecy, peace be on him, as the intellect overflowed toward him without its intermediation.” Maimonides also thinks that the vision of God in general should not be understood in a literal way, as the Onkelos does, but in an intellectual fashion:

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68) Halevi, Kuzari 4.5.2 (Korobkin).
69) Ibid., 4.3.31.
70) Ibid., 4.3.34 (Korobkin).
71) Ibid., 4.5.3 (Korobkin).
72) Maimonides, Guide 2.36 (Pines, 373).
Know that the three words to see [niʿoh], to look at [habbit], and to vision [ḥazoh] are applied to the sight of the eye and that all three of them are also used figuratively to denote the grasp of the intellect (אלעקל אלאדראך). As for the verb to see, this is generally admitted by the multitude. Thus it says: And he saw, and behold a well in the field. This refers to the sight of the eye. But it also says: Yea, my heart hath seen much of wisdom and knowledge; and this refers to intellectual apprehension (ארו אדראך). Every mention of seeing, when referring to God, may He be exalted, has this figurative meaning—as when Scripture says: I saw the Lord; And the Lord became seen to him; And God saw that it was good; I beseech Thee, let me see Thy glory; And they saw the God of Israel. All this refers to intellectual apprehension (ארו אדראך) and in no way to the eye’s seeing, as the eye can only apprehend a body, one that is placed in some direction and, in addition, with some of the accidents of the body, I mean the body’s coloring, shape, and so forth.73

All these texts lead to the partial conclusion that medieval Jewish thinkers, as Philo almost one millennium before them, translate the key elements of the apocalyptic ontology—the heavenly throne, angels and glory—through noetic terminologies.74 Likewise, noetic perception replaces apocalyptic epistemic faculties.

7. The Noetic Turn in Its Major Lines of Development: Christian Thought

In order to have a better perspective of the wide-ranging influence of the noetic turn we have to mention, too, the Hellenizing Christian context. The noetic turn has a very early and powerful impact within Christian environment. I will limit my discussion to some general observations on two significant authors of the earliest period, Clement and Origen.75

73) Ibid., 1.4 (Pines, 27-28). For the distinction between Maimonides’ philosophy and targumic interpretation of biblical theophanies, especially regarding the vision of the kavod and shekhina, see Menachem Kellner, Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism (Oxford; The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 189-215.

74) Wolfson and Moshe Idel, for instance, show that merkavah and bekhalot traditions are essential in understanding Halevi’s key theological assumptions; for Idel, see “The World of Angels in Human Form” [Hebrew], in Studies in Philosophy, Mysticism, and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday (ed. J. Dan and J. Hacker; Jerusalem: Magnus, 1986), 1-66, esp. 15-19.

75) Many other authors, actually the most representative among the Greek and Latin authors from Athanasius to Thomas Aquinas and Occam, should be mentioned here. For a
The doctrine of a noetic translation regarding God’s nature and the heavenly beings receives one of its clearest illustrations in Clement of Alexandria. Already the *Protreptikos* shows that God himself and his image or representation/statue (*agalma*) are noetic, not aesthetic: ἡμῖν δὲ οὐχ ὑλὴς αἰσθητὴς αἰσθητόν, νοητὸν δὲ τὸ ἄγαλμα ἐστιν. Νοητὸν, οὐκ αἰσθητὸν ἦστι [τὸ ἄγαλμα] ὁ θεὸς, ὁ μόνος ὄντως θεὸς.\(^\text{76}\) While responding to Theodotus’s commentaries on the Johannine prologue and also on the titles of the Logos, Clement affirms that none of the existing realities is without form and substance. He expressly formulates this general philosophical principle in these words:

While every thing that has come to be has a substance, [noetic beings] have a different form and a different body than the bodies of this world... The Monogenes is peculiarly noetic and possesses his proper form and substance, exceedingly pure and absolutely sovereign, and enjoys the power of the Father without mediation.\(^\text{77}\)

Clement also clarifies that neither the pneumatic and noetic beings (τὰ πνευματικὰ καὶ νοερὰ), nor the Archangels, nor the Protoctists, nor even the Son himself can be without form, shape, figure, and body (ἀμορφὸς καὶ ἀνείδος καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος καὶ ἀσώματος).\(^\text{78}\) In addition to this, the Alexandrian conceives of degrees of materiality between all these celestial beings.

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\(^\text{76}\) *Protr.* 4.51.6 (*ANF* 2:186): “But we have no sensible image of sensible matter, but an image that is perceived by the mind alone,—God, who alone is truly God.”

\(^\text{77}\) *Extr. Theod.* 10.2-3 (SC 23:78): Οἱ λαοὶ γὰρ τὸ γενητὸν οὐκ ἄνοιξιν μὲν, οὐχ ὁμοιον δὲ μορφὴν καὶ σῶμα ἔχουσι τοῖς ἐν τῷ τοῦ κόσμῳ σώμασιν... ἕκει δὲ ὁ Μονογενὴς καὶ ἰδίῳ νοερῷ, ἰδέα ἢδικα καὶ ώσισι ἢδικα κεχρημένας, ἄκρως εἰλικρινεῖ καὶ ἠγεμονικοτάτῃ, καὶ προσεχῶς τῆς τοῦ Πατρὸς ἀπολαύως δυνάμεως. My translation.

entities. He shows that stars, for instance, are immaterial and without form (ἀσώματα καὶ ἄνείδεα) compared to the earthly things. Stars are, however, measured and sensible bodies (σώματα μεμετημένα καὶ αἰσθητά) from the perspective to the Son, and similarly the Son as seen from the perspective of the Father. The same idea is similarly expressed through light-vocabulary, and celestial realities are also described as noetic. The angels, as noetic spirits (πνεύματα νοερά) by their nature, are not completely immaterial, but have a body of noetic fire (νοερὸν πῦρ). Moreover, there is a light in which the angelic beings themselves ardently desire to partake, a more purified light than theirs, which Clement calls noetic (φῶς νοερόν). Nevertheless, Clement describes the Son as an even purer light than the noetic one, and, employing a Pauline expression from 1 Tim 6:16, entitles it “inaccessible light (ἀπρόσιτον Φῶς).” Finally, Clement identifies it with the “Power of God (Δύναμις Θεοῦ)” from 1 Cor 1:24.

The Alexandrian advances another similar point, but this time from an epistemological perspective. Assuming the principle that neither the seer nor the seen can be without form and body (Τὸ τοίνυν ὁρῶν καὶ ὁρώμενον ἀσχημάτιστον εἶναι οὐ δύναται οὐδὲ ἀσώματον), he observes that the seven Protoctists (the first created heavenly beings) always contemplate the Face of the Father, which is the Son. Consequently, the Son has to have a form and body in order to allow the Protoctists the possibility to see him. However, the theologian observes that the epistemic capacity through which the Protoctists can see the Son is not an ordinary one. It is not the sensible eye, but the noetic eye given from the Father (ὀφθαλμῷ οὐκ αἰσθητῷ, ἀλλ’ οἵῳ παρέσχεν ὁ Πατήρ, νοερῷ).

Following the same line of reasoning, Origen conceives of the inhabitants of heaven, angelic and human beings as spiritual bodies consisting in a shiny materiality:

Now as we have said above, material substance (materialis substantia) possesses such a nature (naturam) that it can undergo every kind of transformation (transformetur). When therefore it is drawn down to lower beings (ad inferiores) it is formed (formatur) into the grosser and more solid condition of body (corporis statum) and serves to distinguish the visible species of this world in all their variety. But when it ministers to more perfect (perfectiorn-
bus) and blessed beings, it shines in the splendour (in fulgore micat) of ‘celestial bodies’ and adorns either the ‘angels of God’ or the ‘sons of the resurrection’ with the garments of a ‘spiritual body’ (spiritalis corporis indumentis). All these beings go to make up the diverse and varying condition of the one world.83

The idea is clearer when considered in light of another text which states that only the Trinity is completely immaterial or bodiless:

But if it is impossible by any means to maintain this proposition, namely, that any being (natura), with the exception of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, can live apart from a body (corpus), then logical reasoning compels us to believe that, while the original creation was of rational beings (rationabiles naturas), it is only in idea and thought that a material substance (materialem substantiam) is separable from them, and that though this substance seems to have been produced for them or after them, yet never have they lived or do they live without it; for we shall be right in believing that life without a body (incorporea uita) is found in the Trinity alone.84

At the same time, Origen still defines God through the biblical and kabod terms of light and glory. As the Father is the true Light (lux) and Glory (gloria), the Son represents his splendor (splendor) in the form of God (forma dei).85 While there are instances where Origen describes the light of God as a metaphor, he also affirms the existence of an intelligible light

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83) Origen, Princ. 2.2.2 (SC 252:248). Trans. G. W. Butterworth, in Origen: On First Principles (New York: Haper & Row, 1966), 81-82. In Cels 6.77 (SC 147:370) Origen affirms that the apostles saw on Mount Tabor the transfigured body (σῶμα) of Jesus. See also the stress on the corporeality of the glorious form in Fr. Lk. 140. Nevertheless, Origen practices a certain precaution, if not a complete rejection, in describing the shape which the glory of a spiritual body may have; cf. Princ. 2.10.2 (SC 252:379).

84) Princ. 2.2.2 (SC 252:246-48 [trans. Butterworth]). See also Princ. 1.6.4 (SC 252:206 [trans. Butterworth]): “we believe that to exist without material substance (materiali substantia) apart from any association with a bodily element (corporae adictionis) is a thing that belongs only to the nature of God (dei nature), that is, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Cf. Princ. 4.3.15 (SC 268:396-98 [trans. Butterworth]): “But the substance of the Trinity (substantia trinitatis) . . . must not be believed either to be a body or to exist in a body, but to be wholly incorporeal (ex toto incorporea).” Cf. Princ. 4.4.1 and 4.4.5: natura trinitatis (SC 268:402 and 412).

85) Princ. 1.2.7-8 (SC 252:124-28). See below that the form of God represents the luminous and glorious dimension Christ reveals to his disciples on Mount Tabor. Origen understands the Incarnation as the process of taking off (exinaniens se filius) this glorious form and putting on the human flesh (see also Princ. 1.2.8 [SC 252:126]).

Every mind (\textit{mens}) which shares in intellectual light (\textit{intellectuali luce}) must undoubtedly be of one nature (\textit{naturae}) with every other mind which shares similarly in this light. If then the heavenly powers (\textit{caelestes uirtutes}) receive a share of intellectual light, that is, of the divine nature (\textit{divinae naturae}), in virtue of the fact that they share in wisdom and sanctification, and if the soul of man receives a share of the same light and wisdom, then these beings will be of one nature (\textit{naturae}) and one substance (\textit{substantiae}) with each other. But the heavenly powers are incorruptible and immortal; undoubtedly therefore the substance of the soul of man will also be incorruptible and immortal. And not only so, but since the nature (\textit{natura}) of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom alone belongs the intellectual light (\textit{intellectuali lucis}) in which the universal creation has a share, is incorruptible and eternal, it follows logically and of necessity that every existence (\textit{substantiam}) which has a share in that eternal nature (\textit{naturae}) must itself also remain for ever incorruptible and eternal, in order that the eternity of the divine goodness may be revealed in this additional fact, that they who obtain its blessings are eternal too. Nevertheless, just as in our illustrations we acknowledged some diversity in the reception of the light, when we described the individual power of sight as being either dim or keen, so also we must acknowledge a diversity of participation in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, varying in proportion to the earnestness of the soul (\textit{intentione sensus}) and the capacity of the mind (\textit{mentis capacitate}).\footnote{\textit{Princ.} 4.4.9 (SC 268:424-26 [trans. Butterworth]).}

Origen asserts a number of times that ordinary epistemological capacities cannot perceive God, but the visionary must actualize special faculties in order to fathom beyond the visible universe. The Alexandrian refers then to intellect or mind (\textit{nous}), and formulates the second epistemological principle: intelligible things are perceived through intellection. In this way, Moses, the prophets, and the apostles actually did not see God, but rather understood him:
This certainly involves you in serious difficulties, whereas we interpret it (senticur) more correctly as referring not to sight (pro uidendo) but to intellection (pro intellegendo). For he who noetically perceived (intellexerit) the Son has perceived noetically (intellexerit) the Father also. It is in this manner then that must suppose Moses to have seen (uidisse) God, not by looking (intuens) at him with eyes of flesh (oculis carnalibus), but by perceiving intellectually (intellegens) him with the vision of the heart (uisu cordis) and the perception of the mind (sensu mentis), and even this in part only. For it is well-known that he, that is, the one who gave the oracles to Moses, says, ‘Thou shalt not see (uidebis) my face, but my back’ (Exod 33:23). Certainly these statements must be understood by the aid of that symbolism (sacramento) which is appropriate to the understanding of divine sayings, and those old wives’ fables, which ignorant people invent on the subject of the front and back parts of God, must be utterly rejected and despised.88

As nous is also called “vision of the heart,” “perception of the mind,” and many other names, the famous doctrine of the noetic senses enters the scene at this point of the discussion.89 Besides this, the text unveils the fact

88) Princ. 2.4.3 (SC 252:286 [trans. Butterworth, slightly modified]).
89) See also Princ. 1.1.9 (SC 252:108-10 [trans. Butterworth]): “But if the question is put to us why it was said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Matt. 5:8), I answer that in my opinion our argument will be much more firmly established by this passage. For what else is ‘to see God in the heart’ but to understand and know him with the mind (mente eum intellegere atque cognoscere), just as we have explained above? For the names of the organs of sense are often applied to the soul, so that we speak of seeing with the eyes of the heart, that is, of drawing some intellectual (intellectuale) conclusions by means of the faculty of intelligence (uirtute intelligentiae). So too we speak of hearing with the ears when we discern the deeper meaning of some statement. So too we speak of the soul as being able to use teeth, when it eats and consumes the bread of life which comes down from heaven. In a similar way we speak of it as using all the other bodily organs, which are transferred from their corporeal significance and applied to the faculties of the soul; as Solomon says, ‘You will find a divine sense’ (Sensus diuinum inuenies) (Prov 2:5). For he knew that there were in us two kinds of senses (sensuum), the one being mortal, corruptible and human (mortale, corruptibile, humanum), and the other immortal and intellectual (immortale et intellectuale), which here he calls ‘divine’ (divinum). By this divine sense (sensu diuino), therefore, not of the eyes but of a pure heart, that is, the mind (mens), God may be seen (uideri) by those who are worthy (digni).” See also Dial. 16-24 (SC 67: 88-102), one of the most illustrative passages on the doctrine of the noetic senses. Butterworth observes that Origen’s reading of Prov 2:5, preserved in the Greek version in Cels. 7.34 (SC 150:92), is not identical with that of the Septuagint; while the scriptural phrase is ἐπιγνώσων θεοῦ εὐρίσκεις, Origen reads αἴσθησιν θεῖων εὐρίσκεις; see Butterworth, Origen, 14.
that Origen elaborated this doctrine in the intellectual context of the anthropomorphic debate. In one of their penetrating insights, both Henri Crouzel and John Dillon made the connection between biblical anthropomorphisms—therefore the vision of the form of God—and Origen’s doctrine of noetic senses. Commenting on Origen’s *Contra Celsum* 1.48 and 7.34, Dillon remarks:

It is plain that he has here developed a systematic theory of analogical, “spiritual” senses for the intellect, or *hegemonikon*, apparently to solve a series of problems of exegesis posed by anthropomorphic expressions about the godhead and about spiritual life which abound in both the Old and New Testaments.

8. Conclusion

The use of Greek philosophical terminology in the texts of several classical Jewish and Christian authors such as Philo, Clement, Origen, Halevi, Maimonides, and Gersonides does not represent a mere Greek color attached to their discourse. To the contrary, it deeply affects and substantially reshapes the Jewish theological vision in its main ontological and epistemological categories. Biblical and apocalyptic ontologies and epistemologies, generally conceived according to the norms and categories of everyday knowledge are translated and re-conceived according to the distinction between the aesthetic and the noetic. Heavenly realities are re-defined through noetic categories and new ontological doctrines regarding the levels of divine concealment and manifestation are now elaborated. Human access to the divine is re-conceived through sophisticated episte-

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mological vocabulary and the heavenly mysteries of apocalypticism are now apprehended through the intellect. In addition, the representatives of the noetic trajectory frequently take anti-anthropomorphic stances and postulate that God’s essence is beyond human noetic perception. A new hermeneutical rule appears several times in the writings of these authors: they criticize the literal reading and the anthropomorphic language of the Bible and apocalyptic literature, and manifest discontent with the everyday epistemological language of the Bible, apocalyptic literature and literal interpreters.

Consequently, the noetic turn represents a fundamental change in Jewish theological discourse, perhaps the most important after that from prophetic literature to apocalypticism. Its emergence, however, does not put an end to the apocalyptic discourse in Jewish and Christian thought, but critiques and reformulates the basic ontology and epistemology of biblical and apocalyptic thought. Beginning with Philo, the noetic and the apocalyptic paradigms will coexist for centuries in both Jewish and Christian cultures. Most likely, the noetic turn will entail an axial trend in Jewish and Christian thinking, introducing all these key philosophico-theological structures in the theorization of numerous classical Jewish and Christian authors of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.