

Exodus 24:9-11 with traditional commentaries

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנֵת הַסַּפִּיר וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר: וְאֵל־אֲצִילֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזִיז אֶת־הַקַּלְהֵיִם וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ: {ס}

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet [God] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

Rashi: (11th century, focus on simple meaning with interpretive elaborations)

They saw the God of Israel: They intellectually perceived, [they had a hazon, a vision] they did not actually see God as it says, “No living person can see Me and live”

They beheld God and they ate and drank: They gazed at God as though their association were a matter of eating and drinking.

Rabbeinu Bahya: (14th century, incorporating literal with allegorical and mystical interpretations)

And they ‘saw’: The Torah refers to the attribute kavod....We know that it is impossible to experience a vision of Hashem, as Hashem specifically told Moses that His attribute of Hashem cannot be seen by any living human being.

Ibn Ezra: (12th century, focus on simple meaning of text incorporating grammar and linguistics)

They saw the God of Israel: Not seeing with their eyes, in a prophetic vision.
They ate and drank: They came down from the mountain happy.

Onkelos: (2nd century, authoritative translation of Torah into Aramaic)

They beheld God and they ate and drank: They beheld God’s glory and rejoiced in their offerings which were accepted as if they were eating and drinking.

Rashbam: (12th century, focus on simple meaning)

Just as Torah describes God’s back becoming visible (Ex.33:23), so the meaning of the elders “seeing” means that the manifestation of God’s attributes they had experienced made God as real to them *as if* they had seen God with their physical eyes.