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Revelation and Authority

Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition

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Introduction: Participatory Theories of Revelation

The relationship between revelation and authority in Judaism has been discussed by scholars, preachers, philosophers, and mystics throughout Jewish history. It has been the subject of commentaries and treatises, poems and sermons, discussions and debates. The chapters that follow examine this relationship from a vantage point that is surprisingly rare. I focus on the biblical texts themselves, especially ones that raise the issue of religious authority while narrating God's act of revelation, and I connect those biblical texts to later Jewish understandings of lawgiving at Sinai. My thesis is a simple one. Many biblical texts that describe the giving of Torah move simultaneously and without contradiction in two directions: they anchor the authority of Jewish law and lore in the revelation at Sinai, but they also destabilize that authority by teaching that we cannot be sure how, exactly, the specific rules found in the Pentateuch relate to God's self-disclosure. On the one hand, these biblical texts insist that duties emerge from the event at Sinai: the religious practices performed by members of the nation that witnessed revelation are matters not of choice but of obligation. These texts ground the law's authority in the divine will, which God deliberately made known to a group of human beings. On the other hand, these texts also problematize the notion of revelation by making their readers unsure as to precisely what occurred at Mount Sinai. These narratives provoke their audience to wonder, did the teachings and laws that result from the event at Sinai come directly from God's mouth, or are they the product of human intermediation and interpretation? These biblical texts suggest that revelation involved active contributions by both God and Israel; revelation was collaborative and participatory.

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Throughout this book I use the terms “participatory theory of revelation” and “participatory theology” to speak of approaches to revelation that view the Pentateuch (and Jewish tradition generally) as the result of a dialogue between God and Israel. According to the participatory theology, the Pentateuch not only conveys God’s will but also reflects Israel’s interpretation of and response to that will. This view of revelation puts a premium on human agency and gives witness to the grandeur of a God who accomplishes a providential task through the free will of human subjects under God’s authority.¹ We may contrast participatory theologies with a better-known view of revelation, which I term “the stenographic theory of revelation.” According to the latter theory, God dictated all the words of the Pentateuch to Moses, and Moses recorded God’s words without altering them. In the stenographic theory, all the words of the Pentateuch are God’s. In the participatory theory, the wording in the Pentateuch is a joint effort involving heavenly and earthly contributions; or the wording may be an entirely human response to God’s real but nonverbal revelation. Especially in the second chapter of this book, I argue that the Pentateuch itself gives voice to both stenographic and participatory theologies of revelation.

The Bible is the first Jewish book that valorizes yet questions revelation, but it is not the last, because certain medieval and modern Jewish thinkers make similar moves. Among modern Jews, this trend is evident in the work of the great German philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), the influential Polish American theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), and the British scholar and communal leader Louis Jacobs (1920–2006). To some degree, it is also evident in the writings of the German philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), the Romanian British American scholar and communal leader Solomon Schechter (1847–1915), and the French philosophers Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and André Neher (1914–1988). Elements of this trend, we shall see, can be found among medieval Jewish mystics and philosophers, and in classical rabbinic texts of the talmudic era.

That medieval and rabbinic precursors can be found for what is usually thought of as a modern understanding of revelation has been argued by others, especially by Heschel himself in his three-volume masterpiece, *Torah min Hashamayim Be’aspaqlaria shel Hadorot*,² and by Yoḥanan Silman in his book *Qol Gadol Velo Yasaf: Torat Yisrael bein Shleimut Lehishtalmut*.³ More recently, Eran Viesel has argued that several medieval biblical commentators, especially ibn Ezra and Rashbam, regard the wording of the Pentateuch as a mixture of divine and human elements that include not

only God's own words but also, and more frequently, Moses's own words. Viezel further maintains that what I call the stenographic theory of revelation is less common among the talmudic rabbis than is generally assumed, and that it became the standard in Jewish thought only starting in the thirteenth century CE.⁴ But scholars and theologians have not noticed the ways in which the Bible anticipates later Jewish thinkers who put forth a participatory theology and the extent to which biblical authors themselves probed the connections between revelation and authority. There are two main reasons scholars failed to observe the Bible's subtlety on this matter. First, scholars of Jewish thought and Christian theology tend not to engage in close literary readings of the biblical texts. Rather, they cite biblical verses as background before moving on to their own fields of specialty. (Rosenzweig and Heschel constitute exceptions to this trend, as does Martin Buber, whose view of revelation and authority is very different from the one that concerns me in this book. The most important exception to this trend among modern Christian theologians is Karl Barth.) Second, the complexity of biblical portrayals of lawgiving communicates itself most clearly when we read the Bible as the anthology of ancient Near Eastern texts that it is, and thus see biblical texts as their first audiences in ancient Israel saw them—in other words, when we examine the Bible through the lenses of modern biblical criticism. (By “biblical criticism” I mean the sort of biblical study carried out by professors in modern universities, colleges, and seminaries; I discuss the methods and assumptions of this field in more detail in the chapter that follows.) Theologians, both Jewish and Christian, have tended to shun biblical criticism, regarding it either as inimical or (what is worse) irrelevant to theological concerns. I hope to show, however, that it is precisely when we respect biblical texts enough to go through the labor of re-creating their original contexts that they emerge as religiously relevant to modern readers.⁵ The biblical critical analyses I present will help us to discern powerful continuities between the biblical texts that describe revelation and the traditions that follow them.⁶

This book, then, has two topics. It is a book about the Bible, because I present interpretations of biblical passages, and I use those interpretations to reconstruct ancient Israelite attitudes toward religious authority. For this reason the book belongs to the field of biblical scholarship; it grounds close readings in rigorous philology, and it makes a contribution to the history of Israelite religious ideas. At the same time, I attempt to show that the modern theologians I have mentioned were less radical, less original than

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one might presume, because biblical texts already intimate an approach that leads toward theirs—and here we should recall that in theological discourse, showing a constructive thinker to be unoriginal is high praise. As a study of the connections between revelation and religious authority, this book belongs to the field of modern Jewish thought.⁷ This is the case throughout the book, even where I do not engage in lengthy analyses of particular theologians' work. Whenever I interpret a biblical passage or discuss historical background that allows us to understand an ancient Israelite idea more fully, I am also talking implicitly about certain modern thinkers. The proper place of these thinkers in Jewish tradition becomes clear once we achieve a deeper understanding of the biblical material.

More specifically, this book is about the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Joshua Heschel. It would be possible to expand the scope of this study to treat the other figures I mentioned: Schechter, Jacobs, Neher, Levinas, and Cohen, who, in varied ways, present revelation as dialogical or essentially interpretive in nature. Further, one might examine notions of revelation, tradition, and authority in the work of the nineteenth-century Ḥasidic master Zadok Ha-Kohen, the early twentieth-century mystic and rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the mid-twentieth-century ultra-Orthodox leader Isaac Hutner, and the contemporary Israeli religious feminist Tamar Ross. The writings of all four of these thinkers disclose surprising areas of congruence with the approach of Heschel, as well as crucial differences from it. (Ha-Kohen, Kook, Hutner, and Heschel share much in their Eastern European background, especially in the mixture of Ḥasidic and rationalist influences that shaped all four.) I choose, however, to focus on Rosenzweig and Heschel. Their approaches to revelation, authority, and the nature of religious law, we shall see, are especially congruent with many biblical texts. I hope that scholars with more expertise in Jewish philosophy in western Europe and in the intellectual history of Jewish thinkers from Eastern Europe and Israel will delve further into these other connections. Several books could be written on those connections, none of which I am qualified to write. It seems best to limit my discussion to a smaller number of thinkers, lest the book extend beyond my competence, and lest its length render it unreadable.

I have distinguished thus far between two academic fields: biblical studies and Jewish thought. But I argue in this book that the Bible is itself a work of Jewish thought, a repository of ideas and questions that stands in direct continuity with the rabbinic, medieval, and modern texts. Thus,

at a more fundamental level, this book has a single topic, not two that are historically linked. As a result, I often bring together what most of my academic colleagues keep separate: over the course of a few pages, I discuss a biblical passage viewed in its ancient Near Eastern context and a medieval philosophical text that attends to a similar idea; in a single paragraph I refer to scholarship by Semitic philologists alongside studies of modern theology. Some of my colleagues may object to this practice, as if I were illegally crossing an intellectual boundary by citing in adjacent endnotes works by scholars who do not attend meetings of the same academic societies and who write for different journals. One of the points I attempt to make in the present work, however, is that the boundaries that divide these fields are inappropriate—not only intellectually inappropriate but also religiously inappropriate. Both the P writers in the Pentateuch and Abraham Joshua Heschel produced works of Torah, and it is entirely right that a student of Torah will discuss them in a single sentence. (I use the term “Torah” not to refer to the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses, but, as often in Jewish discourse, to refer to Jewish religious teaching, regardless of whether it appears in the Bible or in postbiblical literature. In chapter 4, I return to the varied uses of this term in Jewish culture.) Similarly, close study of a development in medieval philosophy or halakhah (rabbinic law) can allow us to gain a more precise understanding of the multiple voices present in a book from the Bible; consequently, it is both religiously fitting and academically expedient that we compare the medieval and the Iron Age texts. A core supposition of this book is that the work of an Assyriologist (that is, a scholar of ancient Babylonian and Assyrian culture) can help a Jewish or Christian thinker to understand a verse from scripture in a way that is theologically relevant, even as philosophical readers of scripture have a great deal to teach biblical critics. I think that scholars who keep an open mind will find my movement back and forth between disciplines not dizzying but enlightening. The major methodological goal of this book is to reconceive the Bible—and in particular, the Bible as understood by modern biblical critics—as a work of Jewish thought that should be placed in dialogue with medieval and modern works. Thus, this book contributes to what I call dialogical biblical theology, which compares, contextualizes, and contrasts the Bible with postbiblical Jewish tradition. Such a theology can recover biblical voices that were lost or obscured as a consequence of the way biblical books were edited in antiquity, and it places those voices in the longer trajectory of Jewish thought.⁸

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In addition to contributing to two areas of study that can be viewed as one, the following chapters engage in two types of discourse. On one level, this is a study in the history of ideas: I attempt to demonstrate an affinity between ancient texts and modern thinkers. On this level, I undertake a descriptive project. But I also attempt a constructive—indeed, a polemical—project: I argue for the authenticity of the theologies of Rosenzweig and Heschel within Jewish tradition. One might view their approaches to religious authority as modern attempts to square a circle, as failed efforts to retrieve some notion of revelation that might validate an ersatz Judaism in the modern West. Heschel once remarked that Spinoza attempted to expand the concept of revelation so as to deny it.⁹ One can imagine that some critics might make the same claim about Heschel and Rosenzweig themselves. A critic from the left might argue that these two thinkers display a failure of nerve by not rejecting a traditional notion of revelation the way that Spinoza did; such a critic would claim that Heschel and Rosenzweig do not go far enough. A critic from the right might argue that they go too far and leave behind the traditional concept of revelation. Against these not entirely imaginary critics, I maintain that these two thinkers reformulate and expand a concept of revelation already found in the Bible. Their proposals pick up threads that biblical authors and editors wanted readers to pick up. In fact, as we shall see, biblical authors and editors expended considerable ingenuity weaving those threads into biblical accounts of the events at Sinai.

From all this it becomes clear that I speak not only as a biblical critic or historian of ideas but also as a religious Jew. My goal is not merely to describe and analyze but to defend and advocate. In pursuing this constructive goal, I make a second polemical claim: the biblical texts that problematize revelation nonetheless assert the authority of the laws that emerge from it. As a result, I contend, the covenant that came to be known as the Jewish religion necessarily entails a robust notion of law, so that no Jewish theology can dispense with the concepts of *חייב* (*hiyyuv*, duty or obligation) and *מצוה* (*mitzvah*, commandment). The notion of legal obligation that emerges from the biblical theology I discuss will be flexible in some respects. It involves a degree of doubt that renders religious practice tentative and searching rather than apodictic and self-confident. It ought to lead to that most important religious virtue, humility, rather than promoting a characteristic less rare among religious people than one would hope, self-righteousness. But the fact of obligation cannot be avoided, and thus I

argue that any constructive proposal in Jewish thought that does not embrace these categories is at best imperfectly loyal to the revelation the Bible describes and to the tradition that grows out of it.¹⁰

This is, then, a book about authenticity. By examining what the Bible says about revelation and hence about its own authority, this study shows that participatory theologies of revelation, the theologies of Rosenzweig and Heschel, come not from Frankfurt or Warsaw or New York, but from Sinai.

In what follows I ask how biblical texts conceive of revelation and hence of their own status.¹¹ This question leads to an examination of how both they and later Jewish texts understand the relation of scripture to religious traditions not found in biblical texts—in other words, to the question of canon, and thus to the place of the Bible in the wider world of Jewish thought. I begin my treatment of these questions in chapters 2 and 3, where I discuss the status of scripture and law in light of the ways in which biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern texts recall the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. In chapter 2, we will see that similarities between theories of revelation in the Bible and in the work of Rosenzweig and Heschel become evident when one reads the biblical texts with a source-critical eye—that is, when one is open to the claim of modern biblical scholars that the Pentateuch brings together varied and sometimes contradictory documents from ancient Israel. The redactors responsible for the Sinai narratives in the Pentateuch and some of their underlying sources encourage their readers to wonder about the extent to which the texts resulting from revelation are divine in origin and the extent to which their wording is the work of human beings. Postbiblical interpreters from antiquity to modern times react to this encouragement in various ways, some of which culminate in the modern approach to revelation with which we are concerned. In chapter 3, I suggest that some biblical authors conceive of revelation not only as an act in which God conveys something to Israel but also as a process in which Moses translates that something into a human language that the Israelites can understand. Although a theory of prophecy as translation is most clearly spelled out in rabbinic and medieval texts, biblical texts themselves already propose such a theory, though of course they do so in the allusive language and with the implicit rhetoric that typifies speculative thought from the ancient Near East. Chapter 3 further discusses the development of this notion in the work of Heschel and Rosenzweig and its relationship

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to the law's place in the covenant that is Judaism. These thinkers share with the Pentateuchal sources a pronounced emphasis on that binding authority. The chapter concludes by using ancient Near Eastern notions of authorship to examine whether modern approaches to the composition of the Torah present any real challenge to religious readers of scripture. Together, chapters 2 and 3 attempt to show that a traditional understanding of the authority of Jewish law can emerge from what many people regard as a less traditional or innovative understanding of revelation.

In chapter 4, I argue that the participatory theology of revelation implies that the very category of scripture is a chimera, and that the participatory theology resituates—and, surprisingly, resuscitates—the Bible as a work of tradition. This approach implies that for Judaism there really is no such thing as scripture; there is only tradition, which begins with and includes the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings. Although works by Rosenzweig and Heschel lead us toward this realization, neither of these thinkers admitted this implication of his own work; indeed, comments by both of them suggest they would be troubled by the downgrading of the Bible that my use of their work suggests. But the conclusion that the Bible is another form of tradition is less unsettling than it appears. By folding scripture into tradition, my proposal in chapter 4 renders modern attacks on scripture far less harmful to Judaism. Further, both the Bible and rabbinic literature work hard to erase, or at least to blur, the boundaries between scripture and tradition. As a result, some central voices within rabbinic tradition undermine the very category of scripture, dissolving texts found in the closed biblical canon into a larger Jewish canon that knows no closure. Thus, the conclusion I reach regarding the status of the Bible is less disruptive than one might suspect. Chapter 4's discussion of Israel's response to revelation as beginning in the Bible but continuing into post-biblical texts raises another central issue in the work of Rosenzweig and Heschel: the question of whether revelation is ongoing throughout Jewish history. I examine that issue in chapter 5. There we shall see that Rosenzweig and Heschel's discussions of this issue contribute to a debate that was already occurring among the various voices found in the Pentateuch. Chapter 5 points out a trajectory that moves from biblical texts, through kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, into the work of our modern theologians. Appreciation of that trajectory deepens our understanding of the theme of temporality in both the ancient and the modern texts.

In chapter 6, I attend to the main constructive teachings suggested by the treatments of revelation and canon found in this book. There I examine what it means to read scripture in light of these treatments, and I argue (against scholars like Brevard Childs, and against Rosenzweig himself) that for a Jewish religious approach to scripture, readings oriented toward the final form of the biblical canon need not take pride of place. On the contrary, the atomistic readings that typify a great deal of biblical criticism are religiously as legitimate as, and sometimes more interesting than, readings that presume a biblical book constitutes a literary whole. I also take a close look at a conclusion that emerges from chapters 2, 3, and 4: to wit, that the canon is imperfect and scripture flawed. This realization, I argue, has weighty and surprisingly positive implications for modern Judaism. In the conclusion, I address the relationship between innovation and continuity in light of the participatory theology of revelation. I examine how the recontextualization of scripture as tradition and the idea of revelation as an eternal event justify the right of Jewish communities deeply committed to covenantal obligation to modify some specifics within the law. By modifying some specifics, contemporary communities and their sages can rejuvenate that law and render it more compatible with the modern world. But the fact of these modifications does not undermine the binding authority of the law itself. In spite of their many differences, all the Pentateuchal sources (J, E, P, and D) agree that the event at Sinai was not merely revelation but lawgiving. While they differ regarding many of the specifics of individual laws and furnish evidence that these specifics developed over time, the Pentateuchal sources speak with one voice in regard to the centrality of divine command in the religion that the event at Sinai created. It follows that my methods and my conclusions are not as liberal as one might be tempted to believe; on the contrary, the approach to sacred texts I lay out in this book undermines certain modern constructions of Judaism and strengthens a highly traditional understanding of what an authentic Judaism demands. I can restate this final point using rabbinic language: this book demonstrates that one can reject the simplest and most common understanding of תורה מן השמים (revelation) without weakening one's commitment to עול מלכות שמים (the yoke of divine sovereignty) and עול מצוות (the yoke of the commandments).

Before turning to close readings of texts that recall and question the revelation at Sinai, I need to explain why, as a religious Jew, I depend not

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only on traditional Jewish interpreters of the Bible but also on modern critical methods of analysis. In chapter 1, I acknowledge the tensions between biblical criticism and religious exegesis, and I discuss how these modes of analysis differ both in terms of their methods and, more fundamentally, in terms of how they conceive of the Bible. The most crucial differences between biblical critics and many theological interpreters of scripture occur not in the ways they read but in decisions they make before they begin reading at all. Having examined these differences, I go on to suggest why the tension between them need not be a fatal contradiction and how biblical criticism can become useful for a constructive theologian. It is to these foundational matters that we now turn.

Notes

Introduction

1. My phrasing here borrows from my colleague Gary Anderson's summary of my approach.
2. Abbreviated hereafter in notes as Heschel, *TmH*; English translation, with very useful notes, available in Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, which is abbreviated as *HT*. Heschel's Hebrew title can be understood as a phrase, in which case it defines the book's subject as a descriptive study: "Torah from heaven in the lens of the generations," or, less literally, "The notion of revelation as viewed through Jewish tradition." But the title can also be translated as a sentence that makes a constructive theological claim: "Revelation occurs through the lens of the generations"—that is, "Torah comes to us through the medium of tradition itself." No doubt Heschel intends both senses.
3. Silman, *Voice*. For the argument that the participatory theology of revelation is far more loyal to the traditions of medieval Jewish philosophy than most scholars have realized, see also Samuelson, *Revelation*, chaps. 2 and 7, esp. pp. 173–75. For the claim that Heschel's philosophy of revelation has deep roots in classical rabbinic literature, see Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea*, 119–33; Even-Chen, *Voice*, 160–79.
4. See Viesel's articles, "Divine Content," "Rashbam on Moses' Role," and "Moses' Literary License," which attend, respectively, to the views of ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and Abarbanel. While Viesel primarily examines the work of medieval commentators, he also notes that texts of the talmudic era are much less concerned than is often assumed with the technicalities of how God's revelation was reduced to the written form we have in our Pentateuch, and he points out the paucity of texts within the rabbinic corpus that actually claim that God dictated the Pentateuch to Moses word for word. See "Rashbam on Moses' Role," 178–80; "Moses' Literary License," 606 n. 11. Nonetheless, the stenographic theory is articulated by some authorities in the talmudic era; see, for example, the view of Resh Lakish (y. Shekalim 6:1, 49d;

- cf. b. Berakhot 5a [in manuscript versions]) that the entire Pentateuch (and not only the Decalogue) was written down on the tablets that Moses received at Sinai. Concerning this view, see Shweka, “Tablets,” 363–66.
5. In characterizing compositional studies performed by biblical critics as fundamentally *respectful* toward the Bible, I argue against a fallacy prevalent among theologically and literarily inclined readers. Many of those readers regard biblical criticism as destructive, because (such readers believe) it undermines attempts to read biblical texts as coherent pieces of literature. This view misconstrues compositional criticism. As Barton, *Nature*, 43–44, astutely explains, the goal of compositional critics is to recover the coherence of biblical texts by reconstructing their underlying documents. Compositional criticism attempts to find harmonious, complete, integrated literary works that our biblical texts encompass. This goal is achieved especially by the earliest Documentary critics in the nineteenth century and by the neo-Documentary school of contemporary scholars such as Baruch Schwartz and his students. On the unreadability of the canonical Torah and the readability of its sources, see Schwartz, “Torah,” esp. 214–15. On modern scholarship as motivated by respect for scripture, see Enns, *Inspiration*, 107, and Sharp, *Wrestling*, 45–75, esp. 49.
 6. The same exegetical and historical claim—that is, that biblical critical analyses can uncover surprising continuities linking the Bible with later Judaism (and especially with kabbalistic theosophy)—is central to my book, Sommer, *Bodies*; there the topic is not revelation and authority but conceptions of divinity.
 7. On the centrality of questions concerning religious authority for modern Judaism, see Eisen, *Rethinking*, 209–10. On its centrality throughout Heschel’s work, see Eisen, “Re-Reading Heschel,” 6.
 8. For a programmatic discussion of this model, see Sommer, “Dialogical,” which serves as the theoretical underpinning to this book. Several recent works similarly emphasize the theological and anthropological richness of the Bible’s record of ancient Israelite conversation and debate: Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*; Brueggemann, *Theology*; Knohl, *Divine Symphony*; and Carasik, *Bible’s Many Voices*.
 9. See Heschel, *Prophets*, 525. Cf. similar remarks on Schleiermacher’s problematic legacy for the notion of revelation in Rosenzweig, *Star* [Hallo], 99–101 = *Star* [Galli], 110–11.
 10. Here it becomes evident why I focus attention on Rosenzweig rather than on his close associate Martin Buber. On the preferability, from a Jewish point of view, of Rosenzweig’s view of revelation over Buber’s precisely because Buber’s view does not lead to command, see Samuelson, *Revelation*, 60, 74–75, and III. Cf. Amir, *Reason*, 295.
 11. On the neglected question of how scripture views itself and what biblical documents suggest about their place in the community they serve, see Hurowitz, “Proto-Canonization,” 31–48, esp. 40.