

Revelation in the Jewish Tradition

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The Hebrew Scriptures relate that God reveals His Presence through personal experience (as frequently in Psalms) or through control of history (the Exodus from Egypt, the fall of Babylon). Alternatively, He may issue instructions or laws, whether through a dream, in a vision, through an intermediary such as an angel or a prophet. Occasionally the Presence and the Command are combined: at Sinai (Exod. 19-20) or Horeb (Deut. 4-5), Israel experienced God's Presence, and at the same time were apprised of His Will, through the Ten Words ('Commandments').

Philo

When Jews encountered Hellenistic culture they felt a need to justify revelation as a source of knowledge; Philo of Alexandria (d. c. 30 CE) is the first Jew whose speculations have been extensively preserved.

In Book 2 of *De Vita Mosis* (VM) Philo expounds at length Moses' excellence as philosopher-king, law-giver, high priest and prophet. For instance, 'The next step needed was that the most suitable persons should be chosen as priests ... Accordingly, he selected out of the whole number his brother as high priest on his merits and appointed his brother's sons as priests ...' (VM 2:141-2: Loeb edition, trans. H. Colson)

Philo does not claim that Moses chose Aaron, or instituted laws, on his own initiative. Rather, God revealed to Moses, through prophecy, what by reasoning he could not grasp (VM 2:6). All things written in the sacred books are divine oracles delivered through Moses (VM 2:188). Some are oracles spoken by God himself with the prophet as his interpreter. Philo gives no instances of these, which are 'too great to be lauded by human lips,' but appears to have in mind the bulk of legislation in the Five Books. (VM 2:188, 189, 191). Then there are oracles in which the prophet enquires and God replies and instructs, such as the incidents of the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath day (Num. 15:32--36), or the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27:1-11 and 36:1-12). (VM 2:188, 190-245). Finally, there are oracles 'delivered by the prophet himself under divine inspiration,' such as Moses' addresses to the

Israelites when they were about to cross the Red Sea and when the Manna rained down (VM 2:188, 190, 246-287).

The Five Books are part of 'ancestral tradition,' a record of divinely inspired oracles interpreted by Moses, that is, expressed in Moses' words, rather than dictated literally. 'Ancestral law' is that which is written in scripture; there is also 'unwritten law,' 'law of the heart,' basic morality implanted there by God.

Philo uses the Greek word *logos* in a novel sense. Like Plato, he asserts the ontological superiority of the idea to its embodiment in material form. Ideas are embodied in words. When God created the world, he did so by means of His Word (*logos*) ('And God, said, let there be' Gen. 1:3). His initial, most perfect, creation was of ideas, which He subsequently cast in inferior, material form. So Philo writes:

Should a man desire to use words in a more simple and direct way, he would say that the world discerned only by the intellect is nothing else than the Word of God when He was already engaged in the act of creation ... if the part [of creation, i.e. Man] is an image of an image ... and if the whole creation, this entire world perceived by our senses ... is a copy of the Divine image ... the archetypal seal also, which we aver to be the world described by the mind, would be the very Word of God. (*De Opificio* 24-25, trans. Colson)

The world of Ideas, from Philo's Platonic perspective the real, 'intelligible' world of goodness and truth to which we aspire to rise, is in this sense God's 'Word', and the locus of Moses' 'oracles'; Torah and ancestral traditions articulate it in the best possible manner. It is the Word of God's Creation (Gen. 1), of the Angel speaking to Hagar (Gen. 18:8) or to Jacob (Gen.31:13) and of Wisdom personified (Proverbs 8).

Philo's writings and even his name were forgotten by Jews until modern times, but his ideas remained influential. The *logos*, for instance, resurfaced as the *memra* ('word') of the Aramaic Targumim (translations of scripture) from about the second century CE onwards. So, for instance, God's promise to Jacob, 'I will be with you and look after you wherever you go' (Gen. 28:15) is rendered by Targum Onkelos: 'My *memra* will support you, and I will look after you wherever you go'.

Rabbinic Judaism: Privileging the Pentateuch

The Sages who, in roughly the first to sixth centuries CE, defined Rabbinic Judaism, accepted that the whole extant Pentateuch, with the possible exception of the last eight verses of Deuteronomy, had been dictated by God to Moses. Revelation occurs at different levels; whereas Moses communed with God ‘face to face, as a man with his neighbour’ (Exod. 33:11, cf. Num. 12:8), other prophets would have to be satisfied with a vision or a dream (Num. 12:6). The Pentateuch is therefore privileged over the rest of scripture. *Halakha* (law) is uniquely situated in and validated through its presence in the Pentateuch.

The Rabbis were concerned with defining the *content* of Torah; they did not theorize, in a philosophical manner, as to how God communicated, even though they gave striking and sometimes beautiful accounts of the Revelation at Sinai.

The systematic articulation of *halakha* in the form of Mishna gave rise to the impression that God had revealed not one Torah but two:

The rabbis taught: It happened that a heathen came before Shammai and asked him, ‘How many Torahs do you have?’ He replied, ‘Two, the Written and the Oral’. He said: ‘I believe what you say about the Written, but not about the Oral. Convert me on condition that you teach me [only] the Written.’ Shammai responded sharply and drove him away. He went to Hillel; [Hillel] accepted him as a convert. The first day he taught him, *Aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet*; the next day he reversed the order. [The convert] protested, ‘That is not what you told me yesterday!’ He said, ‘Did you not rely on me? Rely on me also with regard to the Oral [Torah]’ (b*Shabbat* 31a)

The conception of tradition as a kind of second Torah, revealed to Moses but handed down orally rather than in writing, justifies the acceptance of Mishnah and other rabbinic teachings as integral to the Torah of Moses: ‘Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Aggadah— whatever a mature student would [one day] teach in the presence of his master, were already imparted to Moses at Sinai’. (y*Pe’ah* 2:4; b*Berakhot* 5a; b*Megilla* 19b with variations)

The rabbis’ stratagems to show that what they were teaching was no departure from or addition to scripture, but its fulfilment, parallel the way in which contemporary Christians tried to demonstrate that the New Testament was the fulfilment of the Old.

The Rise of Mysticism

Claims of secret, redemptive knowledge are found in several apocalyptic writings. God reveals his 'mysteries' to those Whom he chooses.

Talmudic Judaism, despite an occasional reference such as the account of the four Sages who entered paradise (*bHagiga* 14b), marginalizes esoteric knowledge. Nevertheless, circles of Jewish mystics flourished within the rabbinic milieu (Schäfer 2011); clear evidence of this is found in the mystical works known collectively as the *Merkava* ('chariot', as in Ezek. 1) or *Hekhalot* ('palaces' – 1 Chr. 28:18, cf. *Ben Sira* 49:8) treatises. These describe the journey of the adept through the seven heavens, among the angelic hosts; as well as giving some insight into the mystical understanding of prophecy, they teach that prophetic enlightenment including the 'mysteries' of Torah is accessible to the gifted individual.

The Talmud insists that the Torah (both written and oral) was handed to Moses and is now completely in the hands of qualified mortals who are responsible for its dissemination, interpretation and application. *Hekhalot* mystics do not deny this. They claim, however, to acquire *additional* levels of Torah understanding through their ascent to the divine Presence, where the angelic 'Prince of Torah' reveals the deepest insights to them. Torah acquired in this way does not differ in its practical aspects from the Torah of the Rabbis, but it is enriched by contemplation of the divine, and by witnessing and even participating in angelic worship.

Hekhalot mysticism exerted a profound influence on Jewish liturgy, through incorporation into daily worship of the *qedusha* ('sanctification'), a congregational prayer focused on the angelic declarations 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts' (Isa. 6:3) and 'Blessed be Glory of the Lord from his place' (Ezek. 3:12).

The idea that there was a body of knowledge that was both secret and valuable for redemption continued into later Judaism, especially through kabbalah. Midrash Rabbah on *Song of Songs* (sixth-century Palestine) raises the theme of prophetic enlightenment to the national level. The Revelation at Sinai is the 'marriage' of God and Israel, with Moses as 'best man'; for a moment, at Sinai, when God proclaimed 'I am the Lord your God' and 'You shall have no other gods before Me' the whole people participated in the ultimate revelation and experienced the profoundest 'mysteries'.

The esoteric tradition taught that Torah concealed within itself a path to mystical experience, and that though the Sinai revelation was unique, revelation was not bound to a single event in Israelite history, but remained open, as an ongoing experience in which the faithful might share.

Some Kabbalists went further, claiming that Torah was not a mere text dictated by God to Moses, as if it was something external to the godhead. Torah is a distillation of the divine essence; though the Infinite (*ein sof*) remains for ever beyond comprehension, Torah is itself, mysteriously, the accessible divine Presence. Torah has not only *come from* Heaven, as a book might issue from the pen of an author at a specific time and place; it *radiates permanently* from heaven, creating a living bond between the human and the divine. The commandments of Torah, are, so to speak, the 'limbs' of God, the tangible Presence of the ineffable.

Some kabbalists, inspired by Talmudic anecdotes (*bTa'anit* 29a and parallels), claimed Elijah revealed himself to them and instructed them in the mysteries of Torah. Medieval Rhineland mystics of the *merkava* tradition, such as Jacob of Marvège, Isaac of Dampierre and Eleazar of Worms claimed prophetic inspiration; the title 'prophet' sometimes applied to them indicated that they had accomplished heavenly journeys and beheld deep mysteries. (Scholem 1987, 239 ff.) Still today there are mystics who lay claim to *gilui Eliyahu* (revelation through Elijah).

Medieval Rationalism

The Egyptian-born Saadia Ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi (882-942), later Gaon (head of the academy) in Sura, asserted the supremacy of reason, including the moral sense. Echoing Euthyphro's dilemma he argued that God's ways and his revelation accord with reason not because God *defines* reason and justice; rather, God, in total freedom, acts and reveals himself in accordance with absolute reason and justice. All knowledge comes to us through sense experience, logical inference from sense experience, or an innate moral sense that is itself a form of 'rationality'; the Torah conforms entirely with reason (Saadia, Introduction).

Why, then, did God send messengers (prophets) to reveal the Torah, seeing that we could have arrived at its laws and doctrines by pure reason? Some of the commandments are contingent, depending for instance on historical events, so could not have been arrived at by reason alone; moreover, reason establishes principles, but could not define in detail even those commandments which are purely rational (Saadia, 3:3). Above all, Revelation was a special act of God's compassion; he wished knowledge of Torah to be clear and available to all, even to

those who lacked philosophical ability or time to discover it for themselves (Saadia, Introduction).

Granted prophecy was necessary, how can people be certain that someone claiming to be a God's messenger really is? The claimant must first summon the people to a course of action which is both possible and just (Saadia, 3:8); they may then demand that he establish his credentials by correctly predicting some event which could not have come about naturally, so can be seen to have proceeded from God (3:4). Moses' miracles were greater than those of any subsequent claimant to prophecy (for instance Jesus or Muhammed), therefore none can claim to have superseded him.

Saadia does not speculate as to the channel by which a prophet receives revelation. Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), in Ayyubid Egypt, remedies this deficiency in the extensive section on Prophecy in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:32 to 3:7).

To Maimonides, the Sinai revelation was an historical event. The written Torah was a text dictated word by word by God to Moses and supplemented by an Oral Torah, likewise received from God by Moses. Oral and Written Torah together formed an indivisible whole, entirely public and in conformity with reason; if its profounder levels could only be approached by those with exceptional aptitude and training, it was not because they were esoteric in a mystical sense, but because behind their plain meaning lay philosophical and scientific truths inaccessible to the uneducated, unintelligent public.

Like other medieval philosophers Maimonides conceived of the universe as consisting of a material sphere of earth, fire, air and water surrounded by spheres of progressively 'higher' substances (the spheres carrying sun, moon, planets and fixed stars), culminating in the entirely spiritual realm of God, who in himself is unknowable. Man, composed of soul (spirit) and body (material) somehow bridges the gap between spiritual and material; Man's purpose is to transcend the body and to rise, through understanding, to the spiritual realm, in closeness to God in Eternity.

The individual struggles to achieve moral and intellectual perfection. Actual prophecy, however, is God's freely given act of grace: a divine emanation is channelled down through the 'intelligences' of the celestial spheres, and finally through the 'Active Intellect' (lowest of the ten emanations descending through the celestial spheres) to the rational faculty of the prophet, then grasped and interpreted through his imagination. Prophets vary in respect of the balance

between intellect and imagination, 'imagination' here meaning not invention or fantasy as in modern English, but the ability to form mental images. Those in whom the imagination predominates describe their experience in terms of visions or dreams (*Guide* 2:36).

Maimonides held that God dictated to Moses the text we now have, and at the same time received clarifications and supplements to that text which constitute the Oral Torah. His medieval opponents agreed that the Torah possessed profound meanings beyond the superficial meaning of the text, but rejected his claim that such meanings might be recovered through the study of science and metaphysics; the deeper meanings should be sought in *halakhah* and mystical insight rather than in extraneous science and philosophy.

Early Modernity

If scripture is perfect as claimed, it should be free from contradictions, moral lapses and factual errors. In strict logic, if the Bible contained even one real contradiction, one moral lapse, or one factual error, it could not as a totality be the Word of God, though some of it might be. But only in early modern times, with a more scientific approach to textual study, and with the weakening of clerical control, was it possible to question the tradition openly.

The roots of historical criticism in Christian Europe lay in Renaissance and Humanist culture, in the rediscovery of a world of wisdom and vitality that lay outside the dominant religious tradition. Renaissance scholars turned to Jewish scholars such as Elijah Levita (1469-1549) and Obadiah Sforno (c1470-1550) for guidance in Hebrew; they subjected the Hebrew text of the Bible to literary and historical analysis in the same way they had already dealt with the Greek and Latin classics and the New Testament. In the seventeenth century the full force of the new critiques became evident. Deism had taken root in the writings of Herbert of Cherbury and others; Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium* had been published in 1543, and Newton was to publish his *Principia* in 1687.

The impact of the new worldview is nowhere more evident on the Jewish side than in the works of Uriel d'Acosta (1585-1640), Isaac de La Peyrère (1596–1676) and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632-1677), all members of *converso* families who had taken advantage of Netherlands religious freedom to return to Judaism, a trajectory which invited religious doubts. All three were firmly rejected by the Jewish community for their heterodox views, but Spinoza in particular posed questions which shaped future Jewish, as well as much Christian, thinking on

Revelation. His *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (first published in 1670) was designed as an argument for religious tolerance, but this tolerance implied the rejection of traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation:

I constructed a method of Scriptural interpretation, and thus equipped proceeded to enquire—What is prophecy? In what sense did God reveal Himself to the prophets, and why were these particular men chosen by Him? ... I was easily able to conclude, that the authority of the prophets has weight only in matters of morality, and that their speculative doctrines affect us little. (Spinoza, 8)

Spinoza's concept of Divine Law, which he defines as 'that which only regards the highest good, in other words, the true knowledge of God and love' (59), is that it is universal, independent of historical narrative, unconnected with rites and ceremonies, and is 'its own reward' (62). Clearly, this excludes 'ceremonial' law, as well as laws pertaining to the ancient Israelite polity, many of which were (and are) still observed by Jews.

Such ideas rest on scientific study of the text of the Bible, which reveals it as largely man-made and error-prone, the Pentateuch committed to writing not by Moses but many centuries later, probably by Ezra. (Ch. 8) Spinoza also makes philosophical assumptions, not fully explicated until the posthumously published *Ethics*. Essentially, God (whether or not identified with Nature) is perfect and His creation is perfect; whatever happens, happens in accordance with perfect laws that allow of no exception, since they are determined by logical necessity. Perfect virtue is that which accords with perfect reason, so is invariable; it is not defined by law.

In sum Revelation, for Spinoza, was coextensive with Reason, as a mode of God. By critical reading of Scripture, in the light of Reason, it was possible to select those passages which were of lasting value as the Word of God; the rest could be cast aside as of at most passing value, fitted to the time and place of its composition.

Reason, not scriptural exegesis, was the criterion of truth. This turned on its head the medieval project of subordinating reason to scripture.

Enlightenment and Reaction

Spinoza's immediate impact on mainstream Jewish thinking was to render it even more defensive, but with the development of scientific Bible study which he had pioneered, and with the coming of German Romanticism, attitudes became more favourable.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), befriended by Lessing, moved in such circles. His own religious philosophy was close to Deism, and this coloured his attitude to Torah. Torah, he claims in his *Jerusalem*, is entirely in conformity with reason — by which we understand that God exists, and has revealed the ethical principles which all reasonable people would agree upon; God and ethics form the content of the Seven Commandments of Noah, addressed to all humankind. The Torah contains no irrational dogma, such as those which cause confusion and strife among Christians. Its legislation is addressed specifically to the people of Israel and is binding on no-one else.

But what are ‘irrational dogmas’? For Mendelssohn, as for deists in general, belief in God and in the afterlife were perfectly rational; Christian belief that God was incarnated in the womb of a virgin was not.

The Biblical text, for Mendelssohn, is a literary work of beauty and majesty, articulating Israel’s relationship with her God as a model of the relationship of human and divine. Its essence lies in its ethical and moral teaching; those of its laws that are not primarily ethical and moral are not universal, but constitute the revealed legislation of the polity of Israel. The Torah is not the repository of scientific information; God revealed laws, not science; philosophical truths, not religious dogma.

Beyond the heartlands of the European Enlightenment ideas such as those of Mendelssohn were deeply disturbing, and there were reactions. Mendelssohn’s contemporary in Lithuania, Elijah of Vilna (the ‘Vilna Gaon’, 1720-99), extended and reinforced the traditional concept of Revelation. He held that kabbalah equally with *halakhah* had originated at Sinai. Torah was both eternal and comprehensive:

In sum, everything that was, is and will be throughout time is included in the Torah from ‘In the beginning ...’ (Genesis 1:1) to ‘... before the eyes of all Israel’ (Deuteronomy 34:12). And not only the general principles, but even the details of each species and of each human individual, whatever happens to him from the day of his birth until his end, and all his transmigrations, all in full detail. Likewise, [details of] every species of animal and living being, as well as of every plant and mineral ... whatever happened to the Patriarchs and Moses and all Israel in each generation, for undoubtedly the sparks of all of them are reincarnated throughout the generations ... and all their deeds from Adam to the end of the Torah are [reenacted] in each generation, as is known to those who understand [these things]. All this is included in

the portions from 'in the beginning ...' to Noah and summed up in the opening chapter to 'in creating had made' (Gen.2:3). (Elijah of Vilna, *Sifra di-Tsni 'uta*, p. 34a (205). My translation.)

For the Gaon, the written text of Torah is a Code dictated by God, in which every letter, every mark, even the traditional cantillation, encodes layer upon layer of information; the whole world and its history and all of science are contained in it, as are the minutiae of the *mitzvot* that alone can enable the faithful to negotiate the hazards and temptations of this world. Its contents are teased out in the Oral Torah, likewise revealed at Sinai, and which includes both halakhah and kabbalah. The sciences of the nations are but remnants of what Israel has lost in its understanding of Torah; science, history and all knowledge are subsidiary to Torah, and ultimately contained within it. Like Newton, Elijah regarded the universe very much as 'a cryptogram set by the Almighty'; but his decoding efforts were focused on Jewish holy writings and did not lead him to original investigation of nature or to challenge received wisdom beyond the restricted sphere of *halakhah*.

Meanwhile at Koenigsberg, not far from Vilnius, Kant was speaking of God as a 'practical postulate' to uphold the moral law. How was revealed [religion](#) compatible with such an attenuated God? **In 1792 Johann Gottlieb Fichte** (1762-1814) published a *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* ('Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation'). Religion, he maintained, was belief in the moral law as divine; this was a practical postulate, required to add force to the law. In *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* ('The Vocation of Man') (1800) he defines God as the infinite moral will of the universe who becomes conscious of himself in individuals. In later works he interpreted the Enlightenment as the historical evolution of the general human consciousness, looking forward to belief in the divine order of the universe as the highest aspect of the life of reason, and wrote of the union between the finite self-consciousness and the infinite ego, or God.

Such arguments impacted enlightened German Jews. In 1835, responding to Fichte, **Salomon Ludwig Steinheim** (1789-1866) published *Die Offenbarung nach dem Lehrbegriff des Synagoge, ein Schibboleth*. Steinheim felt that in making the idea of God dependent on the certainty of ethical judgments Kant had seriously undervalued the spiritual. To Kant's four antinomies he added a fifth, that between reason and experience. Reason (*a priori* judgment) constantly found itself at odds with experience, even in the realm of science; science assumes that everything had

a cause, whereas experience demonstrates freedom. Reason operates with logical necessity, binding God Himself to the laws of causality. But this is at odds with empirical observation, in particular with the existential notion of freedom. Revelation is therefore necessary, not to yield ethical principles, which in any case could be furnished by reason, and certainly not to provide legislation. It is needed precisely for that which reason cannot offer, the knowledge of God as totally free Creator.

How are we to recognize a supernatural revelation? Steinheim set six criteria (Haberman, 9):

1. It must be communicable
2. It must be comprehensible
3. It must allow the distinction between true and false
4. Contrary to Schleiermacher, it must not rest on mere 'feeling' (Haberman 159 f.)
5. It is not validated by coincidence with our own consciousness
6. It must have the character of novelty, that is, it should contradict previously held opinion, yet in the end logically compel acknowledgment of its truth.

The revealed doctrine of God as totally free Creator fits these criteria. What does *not* fit is any form of progressive revelation, including claims of the superiority of the New Testament over the Old. (Haberman, 149 f.) Revelation was a unique event at Sinai.

Four principles emerge as the content of revelation: the Uniqueness of God; Creation; Freedom; the Immortality of the Soul. (Shear-Yashuv, Ch. 4) The laws of Torah, however, , contrary to Mendelssohn, do not constitute revelation. True, the *actual* Torah incorporates laws, for instance the Sabbath and dietary laws, but these are of value only in so far as they symbolize the revealed doctrine of God.

Progressive Revelation

Other Jewish thinkers, influenced by Hegel, committed to the notion of revelation as a universal, gradual process. Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840) identified Hegel's 'Absolute Spirit/Mind' with the concept of God in religious tradition, comparing the transition from the Absolute Reality to the generated reality of finite things to the Lurianic notion of the world as generated by God's act of self-confinement (*tzimtzum*). Though all religious faith was based upon the Spirit, the biblical faith was unique in its purity and the universality of its imagery. The unique relationship

between the Jewish people and God, the Absolute Spirit, was at its strongest in the revelation on Mt. Sinai and in Israelite prophecy.

The German Reformers Solomon Formstecher (1808-1889) and Samuel Hirsch (1815-1889) aimed to present Judaism in a way which conformed with German Protestant Idealism yet rejected its Christological doctrines, and which would affirm the place of Jews in 'modern' society. Formstecher presents Judaism as an idea whose full value is revealed through the gradual, progressive development of mankind; the Enlightenment and Emancipation were the intellectual and social-political manifestations of this internal, spiritual process. Revelation is the divine communication concerning the true nature of good and evil. It is the identification of God as a pure moral being, not the communication of philosophical concepts, and was manifested in its purest form through the prophets of Israel. Judaism fulfils its mission among the nations not directly, but through Christianity and Islam, which bridge the gap between paganism and full spiritual enlightenment.

Hirsch, who emigrated to the United States in 1866, interpreted Judaism as a dialectically evolving religious system, in which man comes to know the freedom of his sovereign will by which he alone among all creatures transcends the determinism of nature. Hirsch's ideas underlay the formulation of the fifth postulate of the Pittsburgh Reform Platform of 1885:

We recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

The identification of Judaism and of Messiah with universal human progress reached its apogee in the work of the last systematic Jewish philosopher, the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). God reveals His will by creating man as a rational creature who through reason is capable of apprehending the laws of logic and ethics. Thus, revelation is not confined to any historic event nor even to any special mode of cognition; it characterizes a trait of man, who through the possession of his rational faculties becomes the bearer of divine revelation; there is *correlation* between the uniqueness of God on the one hand, and human reason, as God's creation, on the other (Cohen, 71-84). Judaism is the revelation of an ever more perfect ethical monotheism;

‘every philosophy, every spiritual-moral culture, requires the presupposition of the *eternal* as opposed to the transitoriness of all earthly institutions and human ideas.’ (Cohen, 83)

By the beginning of the twentieth century belief in the inevitability of human progress was wearing thin. Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788-1860) pessimistic counter-testimony to the Hegelians had been taken forward by Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) was shortly to proclaim that the future could only be a period of irreversible decline. In continental Europe, moreover, Jews had to depend more on wishful thinking than on social reality to continue believing in their own acceptance into the promised new universal utopia.

Confidence in systematic philosophy was at a low ebb. Cohen’s two most gifted disciples, Buber and Rosenzweig, inaugurated the era of Jewish existentialism.

Existentialists

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was influenced by Feuerbach’s insistence that the concept of God derived from the concept of man and was centred on personal relations, by Kirkegaard’s critique of Hegelian metaphysics, and crucially by Wilhelm Dilthey’s emphasis on the distinction between the ‘objective’ natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the ‘subjective’ humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*); law, religion, art and history, in Dilthey’s view, should focus on a ‘human-social-historical reality’.

In *Ich und Du* (‘I and Thou’), published in 1923, Buber expounded the philosophy of dialogue in a rhapsodic rather than a systematic manner. There are two ‘primary words’, says Buber, ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’, and all relationships are subsumed under these terms. God, according to Buber, is the ‘Eternal Thou,’ not known through propositions about him, but encountered through each true meeting between an individual and a ‘Thou,’ whether it be a person, animal, aspect of nature, work of art or God himself. ‘All living is meeting’ (*alles Leben ist Begegnung*). (Buber, 25)

Where does this leave Torah? Buber conceives revelation as an encounter with the Presence of God, not as the communication of ideas or instructions. A human response is elicited, but never gives rise to a general law, only to a unique, subjective deed or commitment; revelation has no content beyond the ‘presence’. Far from being restricted to a specific event at Sinai, revelation is a subjective category into which innumerable personal experiences may fit. Historical

criticism has become, for Buber, simply irrelevant; like the Hasidic masters he admires, he does not so much read the text of the Bible as play with it.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) posits three elements of reality—God, Man, the World, rather like Kant's *a priori* concepts of soul, world, God; these three elements relate through the triad of creation, revelation and redemption. He portrays revelation in florid language:

The keystone of the somber arch of creation becomes the cornerstone of the bright house of revelation. For the soul, revelation means the experience of a present which, while it rests on the presence of a past, nevertheless does not make its home in it but walks in the light of the divine countenance. (Rosenzweig, 157)

God undergoes a 'conversion' from the concealed to the manifest (158)

It is love which meets all the demands here made on the concept of the revealer, the love of the lover, not of the beloved. Only the love of a lover is such a continually renewed self-sacrifice ... (162)

(The Soul) ... man ... is the other pole of revelation (167)

The I discovers itself at the moment when it asserts the existence of the Thou by inquiring into its Where. (175)

'I have sinned.' Thus speaks the soul and abolishes shame ... 'I have sinned' means I was a sinner. With this acknowledgement of having sinned, however, the soul clears the way for the acknowledgement 'I am a sinner.' And this acknowledgement is already the full admission of love. (180)

In a letter to his disciple Glatzer, who had said that only the election of Israel came from God, but the details of the law were from man alone, he questioned whether one could draw so rigid a boundary between what the divine and the human (Glatzer, 242). Admittedly, observance of the law cannot be based, as S. R. Hirsch demanded, on historical claims about its revelation at Sinai. (Glatzer, 238) Only in *doing* do we actually come to perceive the law as articulating the Revelation of God:

What do we know when we do? Certainly not that all of these historical and sociological explanations are false. But in the light of doing, of the right doing in which we experience the reality of the Law, the explanations are of superficial and

subsidiary importance ... Only in the commandment can the voice of him who commands be heard. (Glatzer, 245)

Rosenzweig is saying that the specific commandments of Torah hark back in the practice of the faithful to the commandment of love which emerges in the dialogue of God, Man, World.

Sociology and Hermeneutics

In the opening pages of *Judaism as a Civilization* Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983) diagnoses 'the present crisis in Judaism' as arising from the loss of faith consequent on modernity. But there can be no return to an outmoded belief system; Judaism, and its range of observances and customs, are best understood sociologically, as a 'civilization', and in this context retain their meaning and vitality. Our experience of the sacred, as Émile Durkheim argued, is a function of social solidarity; 'the religious consciousness is, thus, the most intimate phase of the group consciousness' (Kaplan, 333). What, then, of God? 'The God-idea in every collective religion functions not as an intellectual assent to a proposition, but as an organic acceptance of certain elements in the life and environment of the group ... as contributing to one's self-fulfilment or salvation' (Kaplan, 317). Revelation, that is, is reduced to a sort of collective cultural experience of the Jewish people, articulated in language about God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), a personalist philosopher, reacted against both the excessive abstraction of medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides and the systematic philosophy of Hermann Cohen. 'As a report about revelation, the Bible itself is Midrash,' wrote Heschel (*God in Search of Man*, 185). Neil Gillman explains:

To characterize the entire Torah as a midrash is to say that it is, in its entirety, a human understanding of a 'text' which, in its pristine, original form, is beyond human awareness ... It is a 'cultural' document because it preserves a human community's understanding of God's presence and will for that community, and that perception inevitably reflects the cultural conditions in which it was originally formulated. But it remains 'divine' because it is God's presence and will that the community insists it is perceiving. (Gillman, *The Death of Death*. Woodstock Vt 1997, 32)

Like Paul Tillich, Heschel defined religion as concern about 'ultimate' questions; 'involvement' in the experience under consideration was what mattered, not the historical investigation of texts.

In the monumental, but unfinished, three Hebrew volumes in which he sought to reconcile his own convictions with the traditional understanding of 'Torah from Heaven', he contrasts two types of theology, which he reads into statements attributed to the second-century Sages, Akiva and Ishmael. Heschel helpfully sums up (*Heavenly Torah*, 42):

There were thus two points of views among the Sages: (1) a transcendent point of view, comprising a method of thought always open to the higher realms, striving to understand matters of Torah through a supernal lens; and (2) an immanent point of view, comprising a method of thought modest and confined, satisfied to understand matters of Torah through an earthly lens defined by human experience.

Akiva's 'transcendent point of view' here is the notion that the earthly Torah is a copy of the heavenly prototype, just as physical objects are, in Plato's view, mere copies of 'ideas'; the Ishmaelian view, in contrast, is labelled 'immanent' or 'terrestrial' to indicate that that the earthly Torah is the vehicle through which God's actual teaching has entered and is present in the material world.

In February/March 1976 the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) took part, together with Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) and others, in a seminar on revelation at the School of Religion and Philosophy of the Saint-Louis University in Brussels. The novelty of this seminar lay in the broad interpretation of revelation as a phenomenon common to the major religions, and in the sympathetic re-reading of 'revelation' in the light of phenomenology and hermeneutics. How can a transcendent revelation produce truths that are not amenable to the all-encompassing faculty of reason?

Our world lies before us, enabling us, in its coherence and constancy, to perceive it, to enjoy it ... Within this world, it appears that the opening of certain books can cause the abrupt invasion of truths from outside — from where? — dated according to the 'chronology' of Sacred History ... And, in the case of the Jews, this sacred history leads, without any break in its continuity, to the 'historian's history', which is profane history. (Hand, 191, tr. Sarah Richmond)

Levinas answers:

This exteriority ... cannot be transformed into a content within interiority; it remains 'uncontainable', infinite (*infinie*), and yet the relation is maintained ... we may find a model for this relation in the attitude of non-indifference to the Other, in the

responsibility towards him ... it is precisely through this relation than man becomes his 'self' (*moi*) ... and – in this sense – free. Ethics provides the model worthy of transcendence and it is as an ethical kerygma that the Bible is Revelation ... The Revelation, described in terms of the ethical relation or the relation with the Other, is a mode of the relation with God and discredits both the figure of the Same and knowledge in their claim to be the only site of meaning (signification). (Hand, 207-8)

That is, the 'sacred history' cannot be captured in words or rational discourse, but it nevertheless impinges on real human beings when they come face to face with the 'other' in the ethical sphere.

Levinas is at pains to explain, against Ricoeur, that revelation is prescriptive rather than dogmatic; it confronts humans by stimulating commentary on its texts, a commentary which is never complete, hence the ongoing nature of rabbinic discourse through Oral Torah, or the 'oral revelation', as he calls it. Although every individual is summoned to 'obedience' by engaging in the commentary, its details are by no means subjective and arbitrary, but confined (though not precisely determined) by the 'continuity of readings through history'. (Hand, 196)

Though the truths of revelation are absolute and universal, revelation has to appear in a *specific* setting: 'The revelation of morality, which discovers a human society, also discovers the place of election, which in this universal society, returns to the person who receives the revelation'. (Levinas, 21)

Ethics may be the point at which the transcendent erupts into human reason, but the eruption ('revelation') does not stop there; in the specific instance of the Torah and the Jewish people it carries with it the full 'commentary' of the halakhic and aggadic tradition and the experience of the Jewish people.

Conservative Judaism

Emet ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism was issued in 1988 by rabbis and lay officials of the Conservative Synagogue of America; the authors (p. 14) state that while they believe that the Statement 'presents a consensus of the views of the movement, it should not be necessary to point out that the Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism is not a catechism or a test of faith'.

They affirm belief in revelation as ‘the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God ... not a human invention’. Revelation teaches us about God and about our role in His world; both relativism and fundamentalism are to be rejected. While the ‘single greatest event in the history of God's revelation took place at Sinai’, revelation continued through Prophets, Sages and Rabbis to the present day. Alternative conceptions are outlined, ranging from personal encounter, with or without propositional content, through ‘ineffable human encounter with God’, which may inspire the verbal formulation by human beings of norms and ideas, to the continuing discovery, through nature and history, of truths, culturally conditioned, about God and the world. (p. 18)

Defence: the *a priori* Torah

In a 1944 Hebrew essay (English version: Soloveitchik 1983), Joseph Dov (Ber) Soloveitchik (1903-1993) created a threefold typology: *Scientific Man* (cognitive, objective), seeks to measure, discover, control; *Religious Man* (subjective), seeks mystery and the preservation of the ‘dynamic relationship between subject and object’. The third type, *Halakhic Man*, bridges the divide between the two: neither transcendent nor superficial, halakhic man ‘comes with his Torah, given to him at Sinai . . . like a mathematician who forms an ideal world and uses it to establish a relationship between himself and the real world’. *Halakhah*, that is, constitutes an independent *a priori* realm that confronts and bridges the opposing worlds of science and religion.

Soloveitchik attempts to bypass critical questions by placing revelation, equated with *halakha*, beyond the reach of history, like mathematics. But this rests on two questionable assumptions. One is that the *content* of revelation may be reduced to *halakha* (law); the other, that law (at least, revealed law) has some kind of independent ontological status. However, riding above mundane historical reality is not a realistic strategy. Laws, including the system of *halakha*, much of which was introduced by rabbis in response to local situations, relate to specific societies. Moreover, law by no means exhausts the content of scriptural Revelation.

Holocaust Theology

Apparent injustice in the world has always challenged the claim that God is revealed as just and merciful; the challenge was augmented by the Holocaust. Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) argued that the Shoah was equal in its significance to a new revelation; he condemned theologians who

continued to teach after the Holocaust 'as though nothing had happened.' Fackenheim grounded his own interpretation of this new revelation in the concept of *tiqqun* (repair, restoration), adapted from the Lurianic theory of creation: 'A philosophical Tikkun is possible after the Holocaust because a philosophical Tikkun already took place, however fragmentarily, during the Holocaust itself' (Fackenheim, 266), in the actual resistance of Shoah victims to whom no realistic hope remained.

Irving Greenberg maintains that the Shoah shattered the naive faith in the covenant of redemption, inaugurating a third era the shape of which is determined by our response to the crisis of faith. Auschwitz was 'a call to humans to stop the Holocaust, a call to the people Israel to rise to a new, unprecedented level of covenantal responsibility.' Jews today have a special responsibility, in fidelity to those who perished, to work for the abolition of that matrix of values that supported genocide.

Such reflections are not so much theologies of revelation as attempts to restore a sense of the Presence of God notwithstanding the terrible events He has allowed to take place.

The Feminist Critique

So long as society at large did not question the subordination of slaves or women, few theologians were troubled either. But the Bible accepts both the institution of slavery and the subordination of women even if, as many argue, it introduces measures to ameliorate both.

Feminism, like slavery, has lead theologians to confront a fundamental issue concerning the culture-boundedness of divine revelation. Tamar Ross, writing in defence of a Modern Orthodox position, articulated the question:

What makes the feminist analysis unique is that the ultimate question it raises does not concern any particular difficulty in the contents of the Torah (be it moral, scientific, or theological). Nor does it concern the accuracy of the historical account of its literary genesis. Highlighting an all-pervasive male bias in the Torah seems to display a more general skepticism regarding divine revelation that is much more profound. What it drives us to ask is, Can any verbal message claiming revelatory status really be divine? Because language itself is shaped by the cultural context in which it is formulated ... is a divine and eternally valid message at all possible? Can a verbal message transcend its cultural framework? ... Allegorical interpretations of problematic passages in the

Torah will not solve anything in this case. The male bias cannot be limited to specific terms or passages; it is all over the text. (Ross EPT, 186)

In response Ross develops a concept she calls 'cumulative revelation'. This rests on three assumptions: 'Revelation is a cumulative process: a dynamic unfolding of the original Torah transmitted at Sinai'; God's voice is heard through the rabbinical exposition of texts; 'Although successive hearings of God's Torah sometimes *appear* to contradict His original message, that message is never replaced.' (EPT 197-198)

The third assumption distinguishes Ross's position from reformist understanding of progressive revelation; Ross is unwilling to concede that the latest accumulated revelation contradicts or replaces earlier formulations. 'If feminist morality is more than a passing fad, it is likely that the interpretive tradition will discover that some of the values expressed by the feminists are indeed those of the Torah and should be pursued accordingly' (EPT 222). But who articulates the 'interpretive tradition'? Ross appeals to the authority of Rav Kook (Abraham Isaac Kook, 1865-1935):

By positing a supernal Torah and successive unfolding of that Torah as progressive revelations of a pre-existent ideal, R. Kook concludes that if certain unprecedented ideas or norms become absorbed within tradition, it is a fair indication of the workings of divine providence. Such providence is attuned ... to our gradually maturing spiritual sensibilities.' (EPT 205)

'As If'

Many Modern Orthodox as well as Conservative scholars have found the claims of critical Bible study irresistible and modified their understanding of revelation accordingly. James Kugel (2007) argues that the findings of modern academic Bible study are primarily of academic interest; what the words of scripture may have meant in their ancient contexts has no bearing on the Jewish interpretation of these words. The 'Oral Torah,' not the written text, is the primary vehicle of access to God and revelation for Jews; service of God for the faithful Jew means actively engaging and interpreting the Torah along the trajectory plotted by the Rabbis in their attempt to keep the Torah a flexible and living document.

Menachem Kellner (1999) maintains that what counts in Judaism is practice rather than dogma. There are things that Jews must profess to believe, such as God's covenant with Israel, the

obligation to observe the commandments, sanctity of the Torah, etc., but there is no need to have any specific idea in mind behind these professions. One can sincerely profess belief in the divinity of the Torah, abstaining from definition, while adhering to *halakhic* practice.

Marc Brettler (2012, 57) simultaneously upholds the discoveries of biblical criticism and lives the life of an observant Jew. For him ‘the Bible is a sourcebook that I—within my community—make into a textbook. I do so by selecting, revaluating, and interpreting texts that I call sacred. The Bible is the collection of ancient literature that my community has sanctified. I am selective in using it since I believe that the Bible has come down to us through human hands, and that the revelation which it contains has been, to use the term of David Weiss Halivni, (deeply) ‘maculated’ or tarnished ... I hope others will respect my reconstruction, which justifies how I lead my Jewish life, based on how I have made this sourcebook, that all Jews share, into my textbook ... It is crucial, however, to engage in this reworking so that the ethical problems suggested by a literal reading of certain places of the Bible—xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia—are not transferred into the textbook.’

My own approach (Solomon 2012) has been to retain the traditional language of revelation, including that of the unique Revelation at Sinai, while interpreting that language in accordance with anthropological models: ask not what happened at Mount Sinai, but how the narrative functions within the community it defines. As a foundational myth, binding together stories, laws, interpretations and experiences of Jews through the ages and conferring authority on the rituals in which these are expressed, it possesses great power. But it is no more dependent on historical verification than, say, the worth of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* rests on whether the king of Thebes really killed his father.

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