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## *Introduction*

This book is a constructive study of the concept of revelation as it emerges from the Hebrew Scriptures and is interpreted in Jewish philosophy. The first part of the book is an attempt to answer the question, what is the best possible understanding of what revelation is? “Best possible” here means most detailed and most coherent in its details. As such, the first part is a study in intellectual history. Special attention is given to the conception of the God of revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures as classical or medieval Jewish theological philosophers, such as Moses Maimonides, and modern Jewish philosophical theologians, such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, subsequently interpret it. Its conclusion is the formulation of the concept of revelation that will be the subject for the second part.

The second part of the book is a critical study of the concept of revelation in the light of possible challenges to its affirmation from contemporary academic disciplines. It is an attempt to answer the question, is it reasonable to affirm belief in revelation? What “reasonable belief” means is in itself somewhat complex and will be discussed within the body of the book, especially in the concluding chapter. As such, the second part is a study in the philosophy of religion. For now, suffice it to say that a particular belief is “reasonable” if it is logically coherent and there is no contrary belief whose probability is greater. Just what “probable” means here will also be discussed as well as how on different topics probability is to be determined. With specific reference to the concept of revelation, the discipline that offers contrary beliefs that profess to have greater probability is evolutionary psychology. Attention also has to be paid to issues about the morality of revelation in political ethics, the existence and nature of God in philosophy of religion, and the credibility of the Hebrew Scriptures as an authority for reasonable belief in the source-criticism tradition of contemporary academic biblical studies.

This book is a follow-up study in constructive Jewish philosophy to an earlier work entitled *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). This study of revelation is independent of the creation work in at least two ways. First, the interpretations and positions argued for in this book on revelation should be intelligible to a reader who has not read the creation book. However, that is not to say that the arguments presented in the revelation book are entirely independent of the arguments presented in the creation book. Much is presupposed that is argued in relation to creation that is taken for granted in the presentation of revelation. Not knowing the creation book should not hamper readers in understanding the claims made here, but it will restrict their ability to understand sufficiently the reasons for making many of the claims about revelation. For example, I argue in the creation book that what it means to say that a book of philosophy is “Jewish” is that it is influenced by and compatible with major works in Jewish philosophy. In this sense the philosophy of Spinoza is Jewish, because it is grounded in earlier works of Jewish philosophy, even though his conclusions are, at least with respect to classical Judaism, entirely heterodox. Because of his conclusions Spinoza cannot be read in any sense as a spokesperson for classical Jewish religious thought, even though his work is entirely Jewish. This understanding of “Jewish” is taken for granted here without argument.

This book on revelation, like the earlier book on creation, does not argue to defend positions I hold where such an argument would require detailed textual analysis that I have presented in earlier articles. A case in point in connection with creation is the close similarity between Maimonides’ position in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and Plato’s *Timaeus*. In this book on revelation the situation will be the same with my presentation of Maimonides’ theory of negative attributes. I will assume without argumentation an interpretation close to the one presented by Hermann Cohen. I do so because the argument for my interpretation requires a close, lengthy, and detailed analysis of texts that I have already published. However, in every case where I am conscious that my interpretation does not reflect a scholarly consensus, I will footnote where I have given the required argument in print.

The second way in which this book on revelation is independent of the earlier work on creation is that there are structural differences between the two books. In this revelation book the source texts in Jewish philosophy that are considered are presented chronologically, from the Hebrew Scriptures to Rosenzweig, without any question about the Jewishness of

the works. Furthermore, the number of texts considered here is quite diverse, ranging in commentary form over the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. The non-Jewish texts considered are equally diverse, ranging from life sciences like biology and psychology to humanistic disciplines such as ethics and political theory. In contrast, the creation book begins by presenting Rosenzweig's position as a best possible contemporary interpretation of Jewish philosophy and then proceeds to consider his position historically in an entirely non-chronological order. There the controlling questions are whether Rosenzweig's views are Jewish and whether they are true. The question of whether or not a work is "Jewish" rests on whether or not the positions developed, whatever they are, are developed out of Jewish literary sources. In this sense Rosenzweig's theory of creation was judged to be Jewish because it was grounded in Maimonides' doctrine of creation, which itself was grounded in two sources – Plato's *Timaeus* and the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures – where the *Timaeus* provides a reasonable schema for interpreting the mythic narrative of Genesis.

The critical discipline outside the domain of Jewish texts relevant to claims about creation is astrophysics, where there is a reasonable consensus among scientists about the claims that relate most directly to Jewish religious affirmations about the origin and nature of the universe. The second part of the book on creation simply summarized that consensus and compared its conclusions with the conclusions reached from examining what Jewish philosophical commentators have written about the meaning of the Genesis account of creation. The comparison yielded general coherence except on one and only one significant claim – whether the universe is governed by moral purpose or solely by mechanical chance. The universe that emerges from the Jewish conception of creation is a universe governed by purpose and therefore is subject to moral valuation. It is a universe where knowledge is inherently moral in two senses – first, the act of understanding is itself a moral act, and second, an ethical valuation of a state of affairs in the universe is a necessary component of understanding that state. In contrast, the universe that emerges from the conception of its origin in modern physical cosmology is a world in which everything happens by chance, without any inherent purpose whatsoever, and what counts as knowledge, which also is morally neutral, is a statistical determination of a high degree of conjunction between two otherwise unrelated events. What this conclusion called for was a further study of Jewish philosophical topics in the light of ethics, and that is precisely what this book on the

Jewish conception of revelation does. Why that is so requires a word of explanation.

To focus on the God of creation is to focus on an act of God whose product is the universe as a whole. God perceived from this perspective is clearly transcendent – beyond everything and anything that is – and so much so that it is difficult to imagine how such a deity could be immanent, that is, present to and intimate with anything and everything created. This consequence clearly emerged at the conclusion of my book on creation. The problem was no longer how a contemporary, well read, intelligent individual could believe in the God who created the universe. Rather, the problem was how a deity who made the universe the way that it is could possibly care for, let alone love, any creature in the universe, especially something as lowly and clearly insignificant from a universal perspective as a *Homo sapiens*, let alone a Jewish one. The corrective is to focus instead on God from the perspective of revelation in which God reveals himself as a lover of Israel, and through Israel, of all humanity. What then emerges as problematic is how a God who is such an intimate focused-on-particularity lover can be the God of creation. What will emerge at the conclusion of this book, I hope, is that belief in the utterly immanent God of revelation is no less rationally believable than the utterly transcendent God of creation. What will become problematic, however, is how there can be a single deity who underlies both modes of perception. How can a God whose sole act is directed towards the world as a whole in creation be the same God whose sole act is directed towards the single individual in revelation?

I certainly believe that the deity who creates the universe and the deity who loves the individual is the same deity, and I believe that such a belief is reasonable, but I will not deal with this final theological claim in this book. To find the synthesis, so to speak, we must refocus from the deity of creation and revelation on the God of redemption, and that argument requires (God willing) another book. For now it will suffice if I can show that belief in the God of revelation is believable.

Presumably by the final chapter I will have demonstrated this rational belief. At the end, I want to consider more specifically what it means to claim that a religious belief is reasonable, and, finally, what Jewish philosophy in particular contributes to this general topic of contemporary philosophy of religion.

I will concentrate in this general study of the concept of revelation primarily on Jewish texts, just as I did in my general study of creation,

and I will do so for the same reasons. The topic of this book, revelation, qualifies as what can be called “a big question,” so big in so many ways that its answers lie in principle beyond anything that can be called certainty. In the case of creation, an equally big question, the data (both literary and empirical) about the creator deity, the created universe, and the relationship between them are sufficiently narrow in range (*viz.*, the physical data of the origin of the universe and three chapters of Genesis with their commentaries) and sufficiently limited in range of possible interpretations that it might even be possible to claim knowledge of creation in some sense of the terms “creation” and “knowledge.” However, no comparable claim to knowledge can be made in the case of revelation.

First, the texts to study are too diverse even if I limit attention solely to Jewish texts and contemporary science. The relevant texts within the Hebrew Scriptures alone range through the entire corpus. Certainly the descriptive passages in Exodus of God’s many appearances to Moses must be privileged, but so must be Ezekiel’s single most extensive description at the beginning of the book attributed to him of what it is like to experience God directly. Furthermore, once vision is extended beyond the obviously relevant biblical texts to rabbinic commentaries on them, studies of the commentaries on the Song of Songs are no less important than commentaries on Exodus and Ezekiel, for the Song of Songs as a love poem was understood by the rabbis to be primarily a parable about God’s love of Israel and revelation was taken to be an act of love.

In general, creation is discussed in only a relatively small number of texts, none of which compare in length, detail, and importance to the opening chapters of Genesis, whereas revelation is a theme that runs through the entire Hebrew Scriptures and no single text has privileged status in terms of either detail or importance. Hence, epistemic claims about revelation will be structurally weaker than epistemic claims about creation.

Second, whereas the counterpart of biblical creation in modern science is the conception of the origin of the universe in physical cosmology and astrophysics, there is no single science whose subject matter corresponds to revelation. Revelation is a relation between God and individual human beings in which communication takes place. The relevant sciences in this case include both life and communication sciences, all of which have a certain degree of independence from each other and all of which make reasonable but significantly different claims about the same thing. In physics there is a reasonable consensus on how the universe

began, but there is no comparable consensus in the life sciences on what a human being is and in the communication sciences on what information is. Hence, choices about what one needs to consider in making reasonable judgments about belief in revelation are far more complex than those in making reasonable judgments about belief in creation.

Third, the difference is no less complicated in terms of epistemic authority than it is in terms of diverse fields of interest. What physics studies is relatively simple. The distances between the objects considered, be they as small as subatomic particles or as large as galaxies, are sufficiently great that the problems of relationship can be translated into fairly simple interactions between two relatively isolated points. No such luxury of simplicity is available in terms of discussing relationships between human beings. Hence, in the life sciences claims of reasonableness are judged by a considerably lower standard than they are in the physical sciences and this necessarily lower standard is in itself a problem for religious belief. If some people object that it is wrong to judge religious belief by the light of scientific claims because the source of religious beliefs is certain (viz., from divine revelation) whereas the source of scientific claims is less than certain (viz., from human discovery), one can (and should) counter that the interpretation of what revelation means is no less a human (and therefore uncertain) activity than is science, and the degree of probability as well as consensus is so high in the case of physics that it is reasonable, even for “persons of faith” to take seriously the claims of physics in determining the nature of their religious beliefs about creation. However, there is no comparable level of epistemic authority of claims in the life sciences, especially those that are most relevant to interpretations of revelation, namely the computational sciences and evolutionary psychology.

Why then, it can be argued, should we take science seriously at all and not rely for our “reasonable” belief on our traditional texts? It is an important question, the answer to which rests on a clearer understanding of what it means to claim that a belief is reasonable. It is one major theme that will be dealt with throughout this book, especially in chapter 7 and in the conclusion.

My decision to focus almost exclusively on Jewish texts was defended in the creation book in terms of general methodological principles. Implicit in that argument was the assumption that there really is no such thing as “religion” in general, but only “religions” in the particular, so that the study of religion should proceed in terms of religions rather than in terms of some abstract entity called religion that has no existence in reality.

*Introduction*

7

If this conclusion is true, results from studying Jewish texts should yield significantly different results than from studying the corresponding texts about revelation in other religious traditions. That there is a significant difference will be in itself an important consequence, since it would entail a strong recommendation about how to study the philosophy of religion, that is, as studies of philosophies of religions. I will return to this methodological issue at the conclusion of the book.

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PART I

*The God of revelation*



## CHAPTER I

*The God of Israel*

## EQUIVOCALITIES

*“Revelation”*

Revelation, in its most general theological meaning, is a relationship between God and human beings in which communication takes place. As a form of relationship the word’s meaning depends on the terms of the relationship – God and human beings. For Judaism the human beings involved are the Jewish people, the deity is in some significant sense identifiable with what the Hebrew Scriptures describe as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” and the content of communication between what these terms designate is called “Torah.” Therefore, Judaism involves essentially an affirmation of the claims that God revealed himself to the Jewish people, and the Torah expresses that relationship. What this sentence means, however, is not in itself clear. Who is this God who reveals himself and who are the Jewish people who receive the communication? On how these two questions are answered depends what claim is being made and whether or not it is reasonable to affirm it. In this chapter I will focus exclusively on the meaning of the term “God.”

*“God”*

When people say “God” they mean many different things, not all of which are coherent. One important reason for the unclarity is that the word, which plays a central role in all expressions of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), has a long history of development, and through this history the meaning of the term has changed. A second reason for the unclarity is that the word “God” is used in every stage of its history with relationship to three kinds of activity – creating, revealing, and redeeming – and these activities are not necessarily

consistent. Whatever the view is of God in general, the deity affirmed as the sole deity worthy of worship in these religions is the creator of the world, the revealer of sacred scriptures, and the redeemer of humanity. For Judaism, at least God as the creator is revealed both through the Hebrew Scriptures (especially the opening chapters of Genesis) and through nature (especially physical cosmology and cosmogony). The deity known in this way is a God of natural law whose will, identifiable with that law, is concerned equally with every creature, without differentiation, and primarily with the whole rather than any of its parts, be they animal, mineral, or vegetable. Hence, this is a deity knowable primarily as a God of justice.

In contrast, God as the revealer is known through the words of the Hebrew Scriptures and the tradition of the interpretation of those words in biblical commentaries (midrash). This deity is a God of moral law whose will, identifiable with that law, has special concern for the Jewish people, with whom he has a special love relationship, comparable to that of a loving spouse or parent. Hence, this is a deity knowable primarily as a God of love. Whether or not it is coherent to claim that the same being is both the deity of universal law and the deity of concrete love is not obvious, and much of the discussion of theology in rabbinic texts deals with ways to reconcile these two characterizations of God.

What there is to say about God as the redeemer, who is revealed for the Jewish people primarily (but not exclusively) in the words of communal liturgy, rests on how God the creator and God the revealer are reconciled. In some sense creation must be imperfect, for if it were not there would be no need for redemption. Hence, whatever is the view of God in this tradition, it must make sense of God willing into existence something that needs, and therefore lacks, perfection. Similarly, the divine revelation of the Torah is in some sense a blueprint or program for human behavior whose goal is to bring about a perfection which, in some sense, God cannot bring about without human help. Hence, whatever is the view of God in this tradition, it must make sense of a God who desires something to be that the deity alone cannot bring about.

There are many ways to solve these problems and not all of them are consistent with each other. Which paths of thinking to choose depends on other factors, and it is the “other factors” that have determined the history of change in theology in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sacred scriptures in all three religions say something about God and humanity, but not enough in themselves to answer our questions. The questions themselves are essentially philosophical, and, to be answered, they need