

# REVELATION AND THE GOD OF ISRAEL

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## 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

to be situated in a broader philosophical context of meaning. God is the creator and redeemer of the world. What that means depends on what the world is. Different ontologies, that is, different judgments about the nature of what is, necessarily will invoke different understandings of what it means for a world to be created or redeemed or both. Hence, the history of theology is inseparable from the history of philosophy, for, as philosophy changes through time, so does theology. The same is true of God the revealer, for changes in what philosophy thinks it means to be human will affect what it means for humanity to receive divine revelation. Hence, ultimately the two reasons given above for the ambiguity of our use of the term “God” are inseparable. The foundation of our views about God and revelation rests on words of claimed sacred texts whose meaning presupposes a philosophical context that undergoes change. As the philosophy changes, so do the determinations by thinking Jews, Christians, and Muslims of what it means to say “God,” and “God revealed.”

I want now to briefly outline the history of the use of the term “God,” but, before I begin, I want to simplify my mode of expression. First, I want to talk only about Judaism and not about the three Abrahamic religions. Much, if not all, of what I have to say about God applies as much to Christianity and Islam as it does to Judaism. However, my perspective in this book comes primarily from rabbinic texts, and it is just shorter to say “Judaism” or “the rabbis,” or “the Jewish people” than it is to say always “the Abrahamic religions” or “Jews, Christians, and Muslims.” Hence, from this point on I will limit what I say to the deity of Judaism, in recognition that the deity so designated is also the God of the Christians and the Muslims. To be sure, there are theological differences between the three religions, but those have to do more with how God revealed himself to different peoples than how God is to be conceived of. This identity claim needs significant qualification, but that will not be of concern in this book.

Second, I have been avoiding the use of pronouns in referring to God, and to do so is awkward. The avoidance is intended to make at least my initial statements about the God of Judaism gender neutral. The Hebrew Scriptures, as well as all pre-twentieth-century Jewish literature, refer to God as “he,” or “him.” However, in much of this literature it is clear that God is not conceived of as a male, at least not in any physical sense. (The deity of the Kabbalah is said to have genitals, but clearly the deity of Jewish philosophy does not, and no explicit statement in the Hebrew Scriptures talks about God’s genitalia, despite the fact that they say that God has other body parts – hand, face, finger, back, and so forth.)

There are a number of ways to express gender neutrality in English besides avoiding pronouns. One way is to say “she” and “her,” but, except for the sake of political balance, I do not see why suggesting that God is female is preferable to suggesting that God is male. Another way is to say “it,” but this seems to me worse than using either male or female pronouns, since it suggests that God is not a person. Such language would work in some discussions of God the creator where at least divine will is closely associated with natural law, but it seems totally inappropriate, at least misleading, in discussions of God the revealer as a lover. Even worse is to use the plurals “they” and “them,” which suggest that there are multiple deities. (I will not even do so when the Hebrew term used is *elohim*, whose form is plural, but clearly whose meaning has never been understood, in rabbinic literature at least, to express a plural.) Another way would be to alternate between “he/him” and “she/her,” which I find confusing, for it is often not clear that the intended referent in successive sentences is the same entity. I see no other options available. Hence, from now on I will use “he” and “him” in speaking about God, especially when I am describing Hebrew texts where the terms used to identify God (notably, *el* and the Tetragrammaton) are masculine. However, there will be some occasions when I will use the feminine singular, in cases in which the intended Hebrew term is feminine (notably *shechinah*, which I will translate as “divine presence”).

#### A HISTORY OF “GOD”

With both of these qualifications in mind, I will now give a brief history of the use of the term “God” in rabbinic Judaism. I do so to isolate different meanings of the term which will influence different understandings of the term “revelation.”

#### *The deity of the Hebrew Scriptures*

The foundational text for discussing what Judaism has to say about the God of revelation is the Hebrew Scriptures. However, it is not a single text, even by traditional standards. It is an edition formed from many different works written at different times by different authors. The ancient rabbis assumed that everything included in this work is in some sense the word of God even if God is not their author. Some of the books are records of unstated authorship of Israel’s history (for example, the books of Joshua, Judges, first and second Samuel, first and second



Kings, and first and second Chronicles). Other non-historical books are attributed to ancient heroes (for example, Solomon is said to be the author of the Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes; David is said to have authored many of the Psalms). Others are said to be the word of prophets who claim to be repeating what God communicated to them directly. However, among them the Torah proper, namely the five books attributed to the prophet Moses, stands out as paradigmatic in authority. The Torah is both historical and non-historical in content, containing a history of the universe from its creation up to the time when the Israelites are mobilized to conquer the land of Canaan, as well as a constitution for the nascent nation. Authorship in this case is attributed to God himself, revealed to the Israelites through the mediation of the most esteemed of all prophets, Moses.

Modern scholars go well beyond the rabbis in questioning the unity of the Hebrew Scriptures. While the rabbis attributed different authorship to different books, modern scholars question the unity of the sources in each book. The words of the prophets are not seen to be the words of single prophets, but the words of many inspired individuals collected together as if they had a single authorship. This is especially true in the case of the five books of Moses. Hence, there is no reason to think that the views reflected in these works reflect the thought of a single mind. The rabbis also, despite the fact that they attributed greater unity to these Scriptures, isolated and discussed at least apparently conflicting views within these foundational texts. Still, because they believed that all of them express the mind and will of the God of Israel, they thought that the content given was coherent and consistent, and they interpreted the words of the texts on the assumption that with appropriate care in reading they would yield a single true meaning. There is no need to decide this question here. Whatever their origins, most of the books in the final edited version of the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>1</sup> do seem to yield a consistent view of God, and it is that view that I will look at here.

God first appears in the Hebrew Scriptures with a definite description but not with a proper name. The general description is *ha-elohim*, which literally means “the deity.” The term *elohim* is a masculine plural form whose meaning is sometimes “judges” but usually means a god. The God of the Scriptures first appears as a member of the class of gods, but

<sup>1</sup> Most but not necessarily all. The Book of Proverbs, which seems to identify God with “Wisdom,” stands out as a likely exception to the way that I will talk about the deity of the Hebrew Scriptures below.

is identified as the only (proper) member of the class. There may be in theory other gods, but this one and this one alone is the only real one.

What he is doing at his first appearance is creating the world. The details of that creation are not of concern here.<sup>2</sup> What is important is that he creates by uttering commandments. Like the ideal ruler that he is, he speaks, and what he says is taken by his subjects to be a command that they are obligated to fulfill. His first subjects are space (which becomes divided into regions of light and dark), and earth and water (which become separated into distinct regions, separated by a sky [*raki'a*] into earth and sky, and, on earth, seas and dry land). He himself wills lights into existence, which he sets in the sky, which he commands the sun to govern as his designate. He also commands the earth to generate life forms upon it, and he tells one of the forms, the human, to govern the earth as the sun governs the sky. At the end of this process he calls the whole product “good,” which seems to mean well ordered and structured into clearly differentiated domains. In general, God prefers order over disorder, and he associates separation with order and transcending separations with disorder.

The God of creation who has a definite description (“the God,” *ha-elohim*) has, primarily in his activity as a revealer, a proper name, which we do not know how to speak. The consonants of the name are four letters (the Tetragrammaton) – *yod, he, waw, he* – but we do not know what vowels go with it. By tradition this was a secret passed on from Moses and Aaron through the line of high priests of the Temple, but knowledge of that pronunciation disappeared after the Romans destroyed the second Temple. It is traditional to say in Hebrew “my lord” (*adonai*), as in “my lord and master,” as if it were a proper name, and I will follow that tradition here. Hence, “*adonai*” will be used as a proper name for the deity of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The usage is not consistent, but generally it can be said that it is the impersonal deity, identified through a definite description, *ha-elohim*, who acts in relationship to the world as its creator, and it is the personal deity, identified with a proper name, *adonai*, who relates to his creatures by revelation. What is revealed are commandments. God speaks, sometimes in imperatives (as in “Be fruitful and multiply”) and sometimes in cohortatives (as in “Let us make the human in our image”), and his statements function as commandments to those addressed. Generally, what God commands is that things be separate from each other. At creation earth

<sup>2</sup> See N. Samuelson, *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

and sky, dry land and the seas, and the week days and the Sabbath day are made separate. Next God separates a garden in Eden from the rest of the earth, as well as two trees (one of the knowledge of good and evil and another of immortality) from the other trees in the garden. The first sin, which here means violation of what God says, occurs when the human female leads the human male to cross over the line separating the two trees in the garden from the others. The human offspring in later generations will commit another major separation prohibition when they attempt to form a bridge between the earth and sky by building a tower at Babel.

This *adonai* who is *ha-elohim* will make more separations through the course of the narrative of the Torah. At creation he separates the earth from the sky, and on the earth he separates the human from the other animals. We are not told why of all the life forms that the earth generates (following God's command) the human is special except that he is made in God's image. Somehow the human is more like God than any other creature, but we are not told what this means. In any case, he does seem to be special in the number of commandments he is given by God. The human, like the sun, is given a domain to govern. Every life form from the earth, including the human, is commanded to procreate, presumably without limitation, so that the more offspring produced the better in the eyes of God.

Procreation seems to be all that other animate entities are obligated to do. However, human responsibility to God does not end here. There are, for example, implied obligations – such as not killing brothers, as the first human's son Cain did to his brother Abel. These special human responsibilities to the creator are revealed to Noah, the true first man (since all subsequent humans are generated solely through his line, the others dying out in the flood), as a set of laws that by tradition are seven in number. One of these duties, the commandment to procreate, human beings share in common with all living things. It is, as it were, their unity. But the remaining six duties are distinctly applicable to humans. They are, as it were, their difference. In general the biblical narrative distinguishes species not by biology but by political ethics or, more precisely, by commandments that define the purpose of the species in the politically understood domain of God's universe.

Before the first of the five books of Moses is completed God will also separate Semites from the rest of humanity. Semites are different from other people as people are different from animals. People have six divine commandments not shared by animals. Semites have an eighth commandment, uttered by God through Abraham. Semites, unlike other people, are to circumcise their male children.

Subsequently, in the remaining books of the Pentateuch, further separations will be introduced. After Sinai the people Israel will be rendered different from all other peoples of the earth by a law code to which they and they alone are obligated. Rabbinic tradition will list these laws, not so numbered within the Bible itself, as 613, of which eight are shared in common with fellow Semites. Furthermore, subsets of people will be separated through divine command within the nation Israel as well. Most importantly, the tribe of Levites will be separate from all other tribes to administer the government of the nation Israel as well as to administer the Temple, and among the Levites the priests (*cohanim*) will become further differentiated.

Nor is it just people whom God separates. We have already noted that at creation light is separated from dark as are sky and earth. On earth the land of Israel will be separated from all other lands; within Israel Jerusalem will be separated; within Jerusalem Mount Zion will be separated; on the Mount the site of God's Temple will be separated; and within the Temple the Holy of Holies will be separated.

Each separation constitutes a distinction between holy and profane that is associated with good and evil. There is holy time – it is the seventh day. There is holy space – it is the Holy of Holies in the Temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem in the land of Israel. There is a holy language (at least according to subsequent rabbinic tradition) – it is Hebrew. And there is a holy people – Israel. Whether or not these distinctions are based on any objective criteria is not revealed in the Scriptures themselves. We are not told what makes either the people or the land of Israel better than other peoples and lands. (These are questions to be considered later when I turn to the concept of the human.) They clearly are not objectively better by any recognizable moral criteria. In fact they may be worse. All that is clear is that they are “better,” in the sense that they are uniquely holy, where “holy” means something to be kept separate in the distinct service of God.

Note that so far in discussing who God is I have focused solely on what he says, which in his case seems to be all that there is to say about him. What he does seems to be identical with what he says, since, once again on the model of the perfect ruler, he acts by commands that others, his subjects, carry out. We are told nothing else. The text of the Scriptures read by and large as the work of someone who is blind, for the images are almost exclusively auditory. The references to vision in description are relatively few, and, in the case of God, almost entirely non-existent. We are told that God has physical parts – a hand, a face, a back, a nose, a mouth, eyes, and so forth.

The closest thing to an actual description of God occurs in the opening chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. There we are given what is the most graphic visual description in all of the Bible. Ezekiel, sitting in exile on the banks of the Euphrates, sees a storm cloud approaching which takes on in his eyes the shape of the tabernacle of the recently destroyed first Temple. He sees four winged creatures that move by means of unattached wheels filled with eyes. Above the creatures, studded everywhere with the colors of lightning, there is a throne, above which is the image of a man. But none of this is, we are told, God. In fact none of it is definitely anything at all. It is an image of a likeness of something that seems to be a chariot, upon which is a throne, upon which sits a man. And even this image of a likeness is not of God. Rather it is only a focus, like the burning bush from which Moses first encountered God, from which emerges a divine commanding voice. It is the voice and only the voice that is God – a voice that is located in time and located in space, but is not itself anything spatial. Clearly he is nothing visual. Possibly (but not clearly) he is nothing temporal either.

*Is the God of the Bible believable?*

Can we believe in the deity described above? The word “believe” here is unclear. It can mean that we affirm that he did or does still exist. However, what does it mean to say that a “voice” exists? Does it mean that the children of Israel heard it? Yes, if the story is to be believed. What does it mean to believe the story? Does it mean that the story is history, that it recounts events that in fact took place in the places and at the times stipulated in the story? That, I think, is a question for historians of the Bible. I suspect there is no clear answer to be found. The tendency today is for historians to answer this question in the negative, and that judgment is important when I return later to ask in what sense the Hebrew Scriptures, as a testament of divine revelation, are authoritative. But it is not important here.

The question is not (at least yet), is the Bible believable? Rather, the question is, is the God described in the Bible believable? In a word, the answer is no, if we read the Bible literally. However, neither we nor the ancient rabbis have ever read it that way. I will explain what I mean.

If the modern scholars of the Bible are to be believed, the Hebrew Scriptures are not just a single edited collection, but an edited collection of previous edited collections of previous edited collections. No one is sure where the process begins, but at some early stage we have the edition that becomes our Book of Deuteronomy and that serves as the basis,

positive or negative, of what becomes the Pentateuch. These books of Moses form a unity with other books of the Bible some time after the destruction of the first Temple and the first Jewish polity, which in turn form a core for a further edition some time around the destruction of the second Temple and the second Jewish state.

To a large extent these scholarly views stand in direct opposition to the claims of traditional rabbinic Judaism, but the conflict lies in the historical particulars, not in the conclusion. For both the traditional rabbis and the scholars the final edition, whenever it was formed, reflects a Jewish world that is faced with the reality of national and spiritual destruction. One Temple and one state had already been destroyed. At the time of the final editing, a second destruction is either about to occur or already has occurred. No more Temple and no more state. However, taken literally, the biblical narrative suggests that that state and that Temple lie at the core of the *raison d'être* for the existence of the universe.

If we read the Hebrew Scriptures literally, the universe was created so that God could have a Temple in which a nation of priests would daily offer sacrifices to him. Why he should want such sacrifices is for now at least an open question. Why he should need such an elaborate device as an entire universe for the sole purpose of providing him with meals is even more problematic, but that is not an issue here. More important is that if this is in fact the purpose of the existence of the universe, then, with the final destruction of the Temple and its priesthood, there is no longer any reason for the universe to continue to exist. But it does. In fact, the disappearance of the Temple cult seems to have little if any impact on the ordinary, daily operation of the laws of nature, which presumably were set in operation by divine fiat to support the Temple cult.

There is perhaps no clearer example in all of religious history of a religious document subject to the standards of empirical verification, and clearly the Hebrew Scriptures, read literally, fail the test. Again, if the true meaning of the Bible is its literal meaning, then the world exists for the sake of the Temple, so that, if the Temple ceases to exist, there is no reason for the world to continue to exist. Since it does, either the story of the Bible is false or its correct meaning is not literally what it says.

Both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are consequences of seizing the second option. Both, in very different ways, continued to believe in the Hebrew Scriptures as divine revelation, an affirmation that was credible only because they ceased (if they ever did otherwise) to read those Scriptures literally.

If the Bible does not mean literally what it says, what then does it mean? In a sense, all the texts of rabbinic Judaism are an attempt to construct an answer to this question. My concern here is not with its reading of all of the Bible, but exclusively with how it interpreted what the Scriptures say about God. That is the next topic, as I look at the history of the concept of the God of revelation.