

Introduction

Beyond Reason and Revelation

What are we to make of the Bible? It's not easy to say. But a common approach goes like this: There are two kinds of literary works that address themselves to ultimate issues – those that are the product of *reason*; and those that are known by way of *revelation*. Works by philosophers such as Plato or Hobbes are works of “reason,” composed to assist individuals and nations looking to discover the true and the good as best they are able in accordance with man's natural abilities. The Bible, on the other hand, is “revelation,” a text that reports what God himself thinks about things. The biblical texts bypass man's natural faculties, giving us knowledge of the true and the good by means of a series of miracles. So what the Bible offers is miraculous knowledge, to be accepted in gratitude and believed on faith. On this view, revelation is seen as the opposite of reason in that it requires the suspension of the normal operation of our mental faculties, calling on us to believe things that don't make sense to us – because they are supposed to make sense to God.

The dichotomy between reason and revelation that is the basis for this understanding of the Bible has a great deal of history behind it. The fathers of the Christian Church adopted it as a way of sharpening the differences between the teachings of the New Testament and those of the various sects of philosophers with which they vied for converts in late antiquity. Many centuries later, the philosophers of the Enlightenment embraced this same distinction as an instrument with which to bludgeon the Church, using it to paint Christianity as a purveyor of superstition and irrationality. Fideists and heretics alike have thus had ample reason to insist on this distinction, and many continue to do so even today.¹

A case can be made that the *reason–revelation* dichotomy does succeed in capturing something of what was unique and compelling about the teaching

of Jesus' apostles in the New Testament. But it's much harder to make sense of this distinction in the context of the Hebrew Bible (or "Old Testament"*). After all, the principal texts of Hebrew Scripture were written perhaps *five centuries* before the reason–revelation distinction was applied to them. They were written by individuals who spoke a different language from the Greek in which this dichotomy was framed, and professed a different religion from the Christianity whose virtues it was designed to emphasize. Moreover, nothing in the principal Hebrew texts suggests that the prophets and scholars of ancient Israel were familiar with such an opposition between God's word and the pronouncements of human reason when it is working as it should. In addition, the texts of the Hebrew Bible seem largely uninterested in the subjects that made the concept of revelation so important and useful in explaining Christianity. The hidden secrets of God's previously unrevealed plan for mankind, the salvific power of faith, the availability of eternal life – none of these subjects are even top-forty in the Hebrew Scriptures, a fact so obvious and so jarring that it prompted Kant to argue that the Judaism of ancient Israel was not really a religion!²

What *is* in the Hebrew Scriptures? Many of the same kinds of things that are found in works of reason: histories of ancient peoples and attempts to draw political lessons from them; explorations of how best to conduct the life of the nation and of the individual; the writings of individuals who struggled with personal persecution and failure and their speculations concerning human nature and the search for the true and the good; attempts to get beyond the sphere of the here and now and to try and reach a more general understanding of the nature of reality, of man's place in it, and of his relationship with that which is beyond his control. God is, of course, a central subject in the Hebrew Bible. But to a remarkable degree, the God of Israel and those who wrote about him seem to have been concerned to address subjects close to the heart of what later tradition calls works of reason.

Which raises the following question: What if the analytic framework that originally assigned the Hebrew Bible to the category of revelation was

* The Christian Bible consists of two distinct collections of works, which Christians traditionally call the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament," respectively. The Old Testament found in most Christian Bibles is a translation of a body of originally Hebrew-language works that Jews call the *Tanach* or *Mikra*, which I will refer to as the "Hebrew Bible" or the "Hebrew Scriptures." The books of the Christian Old Testament also appear in a somewhat different order from that of the Hebrew Scriptures. Unless otherwise noted, all references to "the Bible" in this work refer to the Hebrew Bible, which is the Bible that is in use almost universally in Jewish institutions of learning and synagogues around the world.

in fact ill fitted to the older Hebrew texts? What if its effect, historically, has been to force subsequent readers to see the Hebrew Scriptures as the early Christians saw them, eclipsing the concerns of the Jewish prophets and scholars who wrote them? What if the texts of the Hebrew Bible, or many of them, are in fact much closer to being works of reason than anything else – only we don't know it because this fact has been suppressed (and continues to be suppressed) by an alien interpretive framework that prevents us from seeing much of what is in these texts?

It is my contention that something like this is in fact the case: that read into the Hebrew Scriptures, the reason–revelation dichotomy becomes a kind of distorting lens – greatly exaggerating aspects of the old Hebrew texts that their authors would never have chosen to emphasize, even as it renders much that was of significance to them all but invisible. This means that in reading the Hebrew Scriptures as works of “revelation” (as opposed to “reason”), we come pretty close to destroying them. We accidentally delete much of what these texts were written to say – and then, having accomplished this, we find that the texts don't really “speak to us” as modern men and women.

This deletion of much of the content of the Hebrew biblical texts is not just a theoretical problem in hermeneutics or some other esoteric academic discipline. It has a direct impact on the way the Hebrew Scriptures are handled in almost every intellectual, educational, and cultural setting in which the Bible is today considered for an appearance: It affects the standing of the Hebrew Scriptures in the public schools, where they are neglected or banned outright because they are seen as works of revelation, not reason. And it affects their status in the religious schools, too – certainly the Jewish ones, but Christian ones as well – where teachers and administrators confer in bafflement over how to transmit a love of the Bible to the next generation despite the fact that these texts are works of revelation, not reason. It also dictates the way the Hebrew Bible is treated in the universities, where professors of philosophy, political theory, and intellectual history consistently pass over the ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures as a subject worth researching and teaching to their students, since they see their work as the study of works of reason, not revelation. And what is true for the schools and universities is true for the rest of our culture as well. Outside of religious circles, the Bible is often seen as bearing a taint of irrationality, folly, and irrelevance, the direct result of its reputation as a consummate work of unreason. This taint ensures that for most educated people, the Bible remains pretty much a closed book, the views of its authors on most subjects unaccessed and inaccessible.

I am by no means the only person to have felt discomfort over this. The ongoing exclusion of the Hebrew Bible from the universe of texts whose ideas are worth being taken seriously is increasingly a subject of discussion in the universities. And in recent years a number of prominent scholars have actually published studies in which biblical texts are read as though they were works of philosophy – often with fascinating results. But all this is still quite preliminary, and there hasn't yet been a book that takes on the question of the Bible as a work of reason in a systematic fashion. What I hope to provide in this book is the first direct and sustained argument in favor of approaching the Hebrew Scriptures as works of reason. More specifically, I will argue that the Hebrew Scriptures can be read as works of philosophy, with an eye to discovering what they have to say as part of the broader discourse concerning the nature of the world and the just life for man. On the way, I will enumerate the obstacles – both prejudices and genuine problems of method – that stand in the way of reading the Bible in this way, and propose tools for overcoming them. I will then take the reader through a series of studies in which I read the Hebrew texts as works of philosophical significance. By the end, my hope is to have made it clear both *that* the Hebrew Bible can be fruitfully read as a work of reason, and *how* the Hebrew Bible can be read as a work of reason.*

It bears emphasizing that in arguing that the Hebrew Bible can fruitfully be read as a work of reason, I will not be defending any particular thesis concerning its status as revelation. In particular, I am not interested in denying that the Bible is a work of revelation. My point in this book is only this: If we are forced to choose between reading these texts as reason or as revelation, we'll get much farther in understanding them if we choose to read the Hebrew Scriptures as works of reason. But I don't actually think that the reason side of the Christian reason–revelation dichotomy is capable of doing full justice to the teachings of these texts either. As I've said, the reason–revelation distinction is alien to the Hebrew Scriptures, and ultimately this framework is going to have to be thrown out as a basis for interpreting the Hebrew Bible. But getting there won't be easy. In Christian countries,

* Some readers will want to know more precisely what I mean by the terms *reason* and *philosophy*. This is a fair question, but answering it requires a detour into issues distant from the present discussion. Rather than go into these matters here, I've positioned an outline of my thinking on the subject in an appendix at the end of Chapter 9. Readers who prefer not to take this detour right now can, I think, get by assuming that I am using these terms loosely, and more or less interchangeably, to refer to man's efforts to attain truths of a general (and therefore not historically conditioned) nature, through the deployment of his natural mental endowment.

the Bible has been read through this distorting lens for many generations. Freeing ourselves from it, I suspect, will not be achieved in a single leap. It will be a two-step process: The first step involves coming to recognize the riches that the biblical texts have to offer as works of reason. The second step involves discarding the reason–revelation distinction completely, and learning to see the world as it appeared to the prophets of Israel – before the reason–revelation distinction was invented.

I have quite a bit to say about this second step, and I'll touch on this subject again in my Conclusion. But the focus of this book has to be that first step: coming closer to the ideas the Hebrew Scriptures were written to advance by learning to read them as works of reason. If we can make headway on that, it will be plenty for this one book. After that, I hope to devote a different work to the question of that second step.

If the reason–revelation dichotomy works so poorly as a lens through which to read the Hebrew Scriptures, as I'm suggesting, what holds this interpretive framework in place? Why do intelligent people keep reading these texts this way, as though they were works of revelation, and have nothing significant to contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the world through reason? There are certainly a number of factors at work here. But only one, I think, has to be considered decisive. This is the way people respond to the fact that these texts are punctuated by phrases such as:

And the Lord said to Moses ...³

Or, in the case of the orations of Isaiah or Jeremiah, by expressions such as:

Thus says the Lord ...⁴

For many readers today, the presence of these phrases is enough to bring them, more or less immediately, to a number of conclusions about the authors of these texts. First, it is assumed that whenever these phrases appear in the text, the author intended to report that a miracle occurred – a miracle whereby knowledge is revealed to the mind of this or that individual without his having made use of the mental faculties that people normally use to understand things about the world. Second, it is assumed that the author's understanding of the world, in which a God or gods could miraculously impart knowledge to the minds of men, is no more than fantastic nonsense recorded by the weak-minded and gullible; or just plain lies set down in books by unscrupulous manipulators pursuing dreadful ends now forgotten. In either case, the very fact that these texts depict God as acting and speaking is enough to show that the authors of these books, whether

weak-minded or lying, were not the kind of people from whom you'd want to try to learn anything.

So as lots of people see it, it's the presence in the Hebrew Scriptures of all those instances of God speaking that makes the Bible a work of revelation, and rules out the possibility that these texts could be taken seriously as reason.

Now, you can't avoid the fact that the biblical authors very often attribute speech and actions to God. And you wouldn't want to, either, because such attribution is an essential feature of what the biblical texts have to say. But the line of argument that's tacked on to this – that these texts are reporting miracles every time God is depicted as saying something; that this way of looking at the world can have no more to it than rank superstition; that their promotion of such reports makes the biblical authors weak-minded or liars, and the texts themselves the product of weak-mindedness or lies; that this rules the Bible out as a work of reason – all this is something else entirely. It's basically a propaganda line worked out by French *philosophes* and German professors in their campaign to discredit the Bible and knock the Church out of the ring as a force in European public life. Maybe there were good reasons for them to have adopted this line of argument when they did. But there's nothing in that to recommend it to us. Like most propaganda lines, it isn't really fair. And when you look at it more closely, you see that it doesn't make much sense, either.

So let's take the bull by the horns. Is it true that in confronting a text that depicts God as speaking and acting, we really have no choice but to classify it as revelation; and, consequently, to rule it out as a work of reason?

The answer that should be given to this question is “No.” It is not true that we have to classify works that have God speaking and acting in them as revelation, and to rule them out as works of reason. For if that were the case, then we would long ago have ruled out as works of reason some of the most famous works of philosophy ever written – works that are today unchallenged as works of reason, and, indeed, regarded as the basis for the tradition of Western philosophy.

Consider, for example, the writings of Parmenides (c. 515–440 BCE), an Eleatic philosopher of the generation before Socrates. Parmenides is no side-show in the history of philosophy. His examination of the nature of being had such an impact on subsequent Greek philosophy that Plato has one of his principal characters call him “father Parmenides.”⁵ No modern history of philosophy sees him as anything other than crucial. Yet Parmenides, who lived about 130 years after the Israelite prophet Jeremiah (c. 647–572), writes philosophy as though it were – revealed to him by a god. Not, as it

seems, a metaphorical god, but one that Parmenides really understood as having taught and inspired him and permitted him to engage in philosophy.⁶ Here is a passage from the opening of his only known work:

The mares that carry me kept conveying me as far as ever my spirit reached, once they had taken me and set me on the goddess' way of much discourse, which carries through every stage straight onwards a man of understanding. On this I was carried, for the sagacious mares were carrying me, straining at the chariot and guided by the maidens along the way. The axle in the naves kept blazing and uttering the pipe's loud note, driven onwards at both ends by its two metallated wheels, whenever the daughters of the sun made haste to convey me....

Whereupon the maidens drove the chariot and mares straight on through the gates along the road. And the goddess received me warmly, and taking my right hand in hers spoke as follows and addressed me: "Welcome, O youth, arriving at our dwelling as consort of immortal charioteers and mares which carry you.... You must be informed of everything."⁷

In this passage, Parmenides carefully describes the experience of climbing into the night sky on a horse-drawn chariot tended by the "daughters of the sun," which ultimately enters the palace of an unnamed goddess who takes his hand and promises to inform him of "everything." And indeed, *everything* we have of Parmenides' philosophy consists of the words of this goddess as she revealed them to him.

What does the goddess's revelation to Parmenides include? Most of the text is lost, but we do know that she tells him of the creation of night and day, the sun and moon, the stars and the ether,⁸ and of "the divinity who governs all things," which looks like this:

For the narrower rings became filled with unmixed fire and those over them with night, in which moves a proportion of flame. Between these is the divinity who governs all things. For everywhere she initiates hateful birth and union, sending female to unite with male, and conversely with female.⁹

Moreover, the goddess tells Parmenides that:

Being is in a state of perfection from every viewpoint, like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its center. For it must not be either at all greater or at all smaller in one regard than in another.¹⁰

And that:

First of all the gods she devised love.¹¹

The goddess informs Parmenides of these things and of much else. Moreover, she issues commands ("These things I command you to heed"¹²) that are

to govern Parmenides' life going forward. And in all she teaches him, the goddess insists that only her own "discourse and thought about reality" is reliable,¹³ whereas "human beliefs" are "that on which mortals with no understanding stray two-headed, for perplexity in their own breasts directs their mind astray, and they are borne on, deaf and blind alike in bewilderment, people without judgment."¹⁴ But since the goddess has revealed all these things to Parmenides, he no longer has to rely only on human beliefs, and so she tells him that "[N]ever shall any mortal outstrip you in practical judgment."¹⁵

This dependence of philosophy on revelation is not restricted to Parmenides. Empedocles (c. 490–430), too, portrays the process of his own thought and philosophizing as depending on the goddess Calliopeia, who "sends" him that which is appropriate for men to hear on a chariot from on high. As he writes:

And you, maiden muse of the white arms, much remembering,
 I beseech you: what is right for ephemeral creatures to hear,
 Send [to me], driving your well-reined chariot from [the halls of] piety.
 For if, immortal muse, for the sake of any ephemeral creature,
 It has pleased you to let our concerns pass through your thought,
 Answer my prayers now, Calliopeia,
 As I reveal a good discourse about the blessed gods.¹⁶

Here, Empedocles tells us that the concerns of men may pass through the thought of the goddess, who answers our prayers by sending down from heaven those words that are appropriate for human listeners. And indeed, it is such a revelation that we have recorded in Empedocles' philosophy.

We only have small fragments of the works of Greek philosophers before the time of Plato, so we can't know for certain how many other significant philosophers explicitly attributed their thought to the revelation of a god as Parmenides and Empedocles did. But the snatches we have suggest that this way of understanding philosophy may well have been characteristic of others as well. Heraclitus (c. 535–475), for example, says that "The wise is one alone; it is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus,"¹⁷ and that "a god is wise in comparison with a man, as a man is with a child,"¹⁸ so that he too may well have been inclined to see philosophy as requiring the assistance of a god.¹⁹ And similar suggestions could easily be made with regard to other pre-Socratic philosophers as well.²⁰ Even Socrates, the very archetype of the philosopher guided by reason, is depicted by Plato (c. 428–348) as receiving revelations and commands and dreams from the gods that give form and content to his life and work. Here, for example, is

Socrates describing the divine voice he often hears, warning him away from doing “anything I should not”:

You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign.... This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks turns me away from something I am about to do.... [M]y familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong.... [I]n other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine.²¹

In this text, Socrates speaks of himself as possessing a “prophetic power” that “frequently” intervenes in his actions and speeches, a “voice” that, “whenever it speaks,” warns him to avoid doing or saying certain things. Moreover, the philosophy that Socrates pursues is itself the result of a series of divine commands “enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything.”²² And while it is true that Socrates does not, like Parmenides, describe his philosophy as itself the speech of a goddess, Plato nonetheless describes him as calling on the Muses and other gods to provide him with answers to the questions that arise in his philosophy, and Socrates does on occasion describe his philosophical speech as being inspired by the intervention of a divine voice.²³ Thus even the Platonic texts can reasonably be said to have presented us with a world in which gods speak to men, guiding them in what they say and how they live.²⁴

What these texts suggest is the following: During the two hundred years between Jeremiah and Plato, there flourished a philosophical tradition – the very tradition that gave birth to Western philosophy – in which the ability to conduct philosophical inquiry was frequently seen as partially or wholly dependent on revelation or some other form of assistance from a god. In this tradition human beings were seen as being unable to attain answers to significant questions on the strength of their own native abilities, so revelation or some other form of divine assistance was needed if they were to reach the truth, which was the possession of the gods alone. Where philosophy in this tradition was successful, it was therefore presented as though it were words spoken or sent by a god, or under the direction of a god.

Yet despite the putatively revealed character of such works, they are today read as though they were works of reason, and not revelation – with historians and professors of philosophy writing about them and teaching courses about them as if they were any other philosophical work. Bertrand Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*, for instance, devotes a short chapter each

to Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus without so much as mentioning the role of the gods in producing their philosophies. He does draw attention to the fact that Socrates believed he was guided by a divine voice, oracles, and dreams. But nothing is said to follow from this.²⁵ And other histories of philosophy aren't much different in this respect. Virtually all of them take the fact that some philosophers presented their works as divine revelation in stride, either ignoring it entirely or mentioning it in passing without drawing any weighty conclusions from it.

Now, what would happen if we were to apply the same rules of interpretation commonly used in reading, say, the prophet Jeremiah, to Parmenides' text about his ascent to heaven in a chariot driven by gods? To his being led by the hand by the goddess and receiving commands from her? To his writing down the words he heard from her mouth, and descriptions of the things she showed him, so mankind could attain truth?

Applying the standards that are often applied today in reading the Bible, we'd have to assume, first, that whenever Parmenides describes the goddess as speaking or acting or showing him things, or when he describes himself riding skyward in the chariot, or the actions of other gods he encounters, he is reporting on the occurrence of a series of miracles to which he was witness – miracles whereby knowledge was revealed to him not due to the operations of his own faculties, but due to the will of the gods who chose to reveal this otherwise hidden knowledge to him. Second, we'd assume that all this is no more than fantastic nonsense, and that Parmenides, in choosing to write these things down, must either have been weak-minded and gullible, or else an unscrupulous liar trying to manipulate his audience for the sake of ends now forgotten. And then, having understood that Parmenides is either a fool or a liar for making such false presentations to us, we'd naturally conclude that his writings aren't works of reason, and that they don't, therefore, have anything significant to contribute to our own effort to understand reality. We'd then dispose of Parmenides the way we've disposed of other ancient texts of unreason.

As it happens, I'm no great enthusiast of Parmenides. My personal assessment is that his attempt to derive metaphysics from something like mathematical logic was a wrong turn in the history of mankind's quest for truth, and that we continue to suffer the consequences down to our own day. But I don't see how it makes sense to dismiss a thinker of Parmenides' stature from serious consideration for no reason other than that his ideas are presented in the form of revelation. As the history of philosophy amply attests, we can't expect the great figures of faraway times and places to see the world as we do on every issue, and not even on every issue we see as