

unwarranted institutionalization of the disabled. Only very recently, after German unification and through the agency of the disabled themselves (using the American model of patient/client self-organization), has there been any movement toward disability access, never mind disability rights. A comparison between the two societies—so different in their motivation and imagery and yet so similar in their response (as opposed to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Sweden)—could be profitable for a future study. Here too I would wonder whether disability is a category differentiated in subtle ways in the various cultural groups that compose contemporary Israel.

Weiss's book is well thought through, well written, very engaging, and peppered with personal extracts and diary entries. The author provides a middle ground between the neutral observer and the participant-observer that really works. We have a real sense of where Weiss wants to situate herself and the anxiety that this situation can generate in writing about a society with which she is overidentified. This is a solid contribution to the sociological study of the body and to the "problem" of Jewish self-representation in the ultimate Diaspora state, Israel.

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Norbert Samuelson, *Revelation and the God of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). x + 259 pp.

Revelation in the ordinary sense of the word is an everyday experience, or at least it can be. It refers to moments of illumination, recognition, or insight. In the context of the history of religion, on the other hand, revelation refers to the extraordinary insight into a reality that is usually hidden and is of great existential importance for an entire community. In this sense, the word *revelation* (from the Latin *revelatio*) is the equivalent of the Greek word *apokalupsis* (apocalypse). It is the kind of revelation found in apocalyptic literature (e.g., in the biblical book of Daniel or the Fourth Book of Ezra in the apocryphal books), and this literature is what determined our use of the word *revelation* in a religious context.

Revelation in the ordinary sense is still a common, if hyperbolic, term. Religious revelation, however, has become problematic. For the apocalyptists, the earth was at the center of the universe and was surrounded by spheres of superior beings whose true essence was hidden from the gaze of the ordinary person, the firmament serving as a

screen behind which God was engaged in managing the affairs of the sublunar sphere. Although we no longer picture ourselves as living in a Ptolemaic cosmos, we inadvertently perpetuate the psychology of geocentrism. Hence, as is the case with other words whose metaphoric value is tied to a dated cosmology, *revelation* still functions in modern religious discourse even though it had to undergo considerable changes in meaning in order to be able to do so. *Revelation* may no longer refer literally to the apocalyptic gaze at the backstage where divine agents pull the strings that cause the seemingly erratic motions on the stage of human history. But while modern man no longer wishes to have his strings pulled, he still feels enamored with the possibility of revelation. But what is revelation to the modern autonomous man who conceives of himself as a free agent in the arenas of private and public action? Is it the revelation of the moral law itself, discovered by the human genius in response to the experience of the presence of (divine) alterity? Because modern man considers religion as the projection of human hopes onto the screen of heaven (Feuerbach), he is also able to interpret revelation as the metaphor of our profoundest encounters with the Universe/the Absolute/the Other/the Holy/and so on. The only difference seems to be that we do with full awareness what our parents did naively.

But how is it possible for a religious concept like revelation to take on such profoundly different meanings? Why is it not, instead, entirely discarded, replaced by something more fitting to the changed worldview of the religionists? Or is it, rather, that, for psychological or other reasons, changes in worldview must be hidden behind words that stay the same even though their meanings change? In any case, in order to possess such malleability, divine revelation must be something broader than the cosmological images by which it is accompanied at any given time. As the symbol of a profound continuum of human experience, the concept must represent a fundamental human need.

Norbert Samuelson's recent work on the concept of revelation presupposes the shift in meaning that we discern in the usage of broad religious concepts such as revelation. *Revelation and the God of Israel* (Cambridge, 2002) is the sequel to *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Cambridge, 1994) and thus the second part of Professor Samuelson's exposition of the classical triplet of the doctrines of creation, revelation, and redemption. In order to make these broad dogmatic concepts manageable, Samuelson limits the scope of his inquiry to a summary of the biblical plot and to definitions of revelation extracted from a few representatives of medieval Jewish philosophy and modern Jewish theology. After he establishes the meanings of the concept in each context, that is, the meaning of revelation in the context of biblical literature, its meaning in the context of medieval philosophy, and

finally its meaning in the context of modern theology, he subjects them to the question of whether they are still believable.

Of the three different concepts of revelation, that is, of the biblical, the medieval, and the modern concept, only the modern one still seems persuasive. This persuasiveness is affirmed by testing the believability of the concepts in light of what Samuelson considers the most relevant sources of scientific knowledge, namely, modern physical cosmology, evolutionary biology, contemporary American philosophy of religion, and Higher Criticism (the literary and historical critique common in modern Bible science). In Samuelson's account, the biblical worldview appears inherently untenable because it reveals as its divine purpose the establishment of a state governed by Torah (i.e., the Law revealed to Moses at Sinai), a state that was destroyed twice and has never been rebuilt. Furthermore, Higher Criticism and its auxiliary disciplines have made it impossible once and for all to take the literal meaning of the Pentateuch as historical truth. That the biblical sources are not to be taken as representing the literal truth, however, is not just a modern observation. The rabbinic tradition never took the literal meaning of Scripture as its only or even as its main point. One might add that the same is true for classical Christian interpretations of the Old Testament. In other words, readers familiar with the rabbinic tradition as well as Christians familiar with their own history of interpretation should be undisturbed by the composite and pseudepigraphic nature of Scripture because, whatever the authorship, the text may still be considered the multilayered response to experience(s) of divine presence. This corresponds to the view maintained by many modern Jewish theologians, most prominently but certainly not solely among them Franz Rosenzweig, who develops his philosophy in full view of modern critical Bible scholarship and in response to its philosophical assumptions and assertions of fact.

Samuelson prefers the modern view of revelation to its medieval predecessors for the simple reason that the medieval philosophers (especially Maimonides) depended on Aristotelian metaphysics and cosmology. As Aristotelian cosmology has long since been displaced first by Newtonian and then by Einsteinian astrophysics, and as Aristotelian metaphysics has long since yielded to Kantian epistemological critique, only such aspects of the medieval concept of revelation that rely on modern, rather than dated, cosmological assumptions can remain relevant.

Throughout the book, no attempt is made at giving a general definition of *revelation* that abstracts from the particular Judaic sources and contexts under discussion. The mundane sense of the word, that is, the sense of the everyday experience of illumination and insight, is beyond the scope of the inquiry to the same extent as the general claim

to truly divine knowledge about the human condition, knowledge that may be the core of the symbol of revelation. Instead, what one finds in *Revelation and the God of Israel* is an exposition of how the concept of revelation was understood in a certain canon of Jewish texts and an examination of whether these understandings may still be considered believable. There may be good reasons for the analysis of a term like *revelation* to proceed in this fashion, but they should have been made explicit. What is also missing in this context is an indication of when and why the apocalyptic concept of revelation was first applied to the Torah.

The strength of the book is its very clear and logical procedure, a merit familiar from the author's previous writing. It is also what makes the book somewhat dry. What is more seriously flawed is the procedure by which Samuelson establishes the three major understandings of the doctrine of revelation. There is little discussion of secondary literature and thus of alternate interpretations of the relevant texts, and there are very few close readings of primary texts. The main tools in presenting the relevant positions are general paraphrases and simplified summaries of complex works of biblical and philosophical literature. The more one is familiar with the texts in question, the less one will be persuaded by this procedure. The question of believability cannot be meaningfully posed if the texts whose believability is in question are not carefully analyzed. Whatever the answer to the believability question given in each case, we are meant not only to take the concentrate for the real thing but to go along with the author as if the possibility of reading the texts differently were of no consequence. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that this procedure is particularly problematic in light of the Jewish tradition's obsession with the critique of written language and its emphasis on orality, which informed such diverse Jewish philosophical thinkers as Maimonides, Mendelssohn, and Mauthner. In Judaism, revelation means the living interaction among readers, traditions, and texts. Samuelson, however, writes as if this interaction no longer mattered. This feels as if we are being told that it is perfectly fine to reduce a three-dimensional piece of art to two dimensions and then to critique it as if its true essence could be fully revealed only when it is thus reduced.

What, then, are we to learn from the debunking of a biblical worldview if what passes for such a worldview is merely the summary of its plot line and of the putative intention of biblical historical narrative? What are we to learn from the medieval philosophical doctrine of revelation if what is critiqued is merely the Aristotelian cosmology of Maimonides, an aspect of his worldview that, of course, no longer represents the "best" natural science available? What are we to learn from Martin Buber's "theology" if the views of his that are discussed represent a single text (*Ich und Du*) and ignore the entire set of his

later writings on Moses and the faith of the prophets? What we are to learn is that Franz Rosenzweig is the only Jewish philosopher whose concept of revelation is still of some persuasiveness, at least to the degree that it can be separated from his problematic emphasis on Israel as a community of blood and his political conservatism. The reason why Rosenzweig is thus privileged is that he tries to integrate his concept of revelation with a doctrine of creation as well as with the redemptive practice of law, in particular with the legally binding obligation of liturgical prayer. Rosenzweig thus appears to be more completely in tune with the rabbinic tradition than any other modern theologian here considered while being less in conflict with the modern worldview than any of his ancient or medieval predecessors.

The continued “believability” of Rosenzweig’s views is established by means of their examination in light of modern biology and contemporary philosophy of religion. Is there anything in contemporary anthropology and evolutionary biology that would render Rosenzweig’s concept of revelation untenable? Can the existence of the God of Rosenzweig be disproven by the means of contemporary philosophical analysis? The answer to both questions is no. Neither discipline has the ability of debunking an affirmation of Judaism as a response to the “encounter [of] a presence so radically other from ourselves” that “a human response to it is inescapable” (p. 237). The first part of this quotation summarizes Maimonidean “negative theology”—the denial that the revelation of a radical other, that is, God, can have any positive content—an aspect of Maimonidean thought that Samuelson accepts as reasonable and as constitutive for Rosenzweig’s philosophical theology. The second part summarizes Rosenzweig’s position, for which it is this very response that “gives revelation the content that it, in itself, necessarily lacks.” The author thus rejects revelation “in the strong sense of the term,” that is, in the sense “that God in fact speaks words to people, and those words are the content of revelation” (p. 237). The assumption that “the words written in at least the Pentateuch are the words literally spoken by God” (p. 237) is thus discarded. In contrast to this putatively orthodox “strong sense” of revelation, which is closer to fundamentalist Christian interpretations of Scripture than to any Jewish point of view, Samuelson endorses revelation in the “weak sense” of a human response to an encounter of the divine other.

None of what is here asserted about revelation is new, and it did not need the marshaling of citations from contemporary works of evolutionary biology and other recent authorities to determine the need to interpret revelation in a nonmetaphysical sense. The author, however, does not seem to be aware that the view he describes as acceptable is quite in tune with the nineteenth-century liberal concepts of revelation that Rosenzweig had hoped to overcome. The Jewish

thinkers of the nineteenth century, among them Samuel Hirsch, Nachman Krochmal, and S. L. Steinheim (none of whom is referred to in Samuelson's book), were fully aware of the impact of historical thinking on the notion of revelation, and their entire work, in fact, revolved around this very problem. Once the overall worldview shifts from the static cosmos of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics to the assumption of dynamic processes determining the development of human consciousness, revelation is in danger of being absorbed by the ambiguities of human judgment, the very thing revelation is meant to overcome. Rosenzweig was not the first to have attempted a rehabilitation of revelation as the key difference of religion without therefore falling back into a metaphysical worldview. The major aspects of his almost Barthian notion of revelation were anticipated by Steinheim by more than half a century.

To be sure, historical observations such as these do not really matter much. It is not even that important whether Samuelson gets Rosenzweig's intention right. It is true that in modernity revelation is widely construed as a human response to the experience of divine presence rather than the result of an act of immediate divine inspiration. Any phenomenology of religion would agree to this. God no longer commands; he simply is experienced as being there, and our collective response to this experience is what determines the content of revelation. Of course, this does not really answer the question of why I should consider the content of revelation articulated by others in response to their experience of the presence of the divine Other as in any way binding or relevant for me personally. Just because something is believable, it is not necessarily binding. What is referred to here as believable really means something that is not unbelievable. To disprove the unbelievability of a statement, however, does not compel me to affirm it as true. Kant's famous "thou canst because thou ought" cannot be turned into a "thou must because thou canst." The moral law may be doable because we ultimately command it ourselves, but revelation is not obligatory only because it is believable. Without a God who actually commands, there is no obligation to follow or believe (it should be noted that one of the Jewish philosophical concepts of revelation absent from this book is Fackenheim's notion of a "commanding voice of Auschwitz").

What, then, is this work really about? Perhaps it has something to do with Samuelson's claim that his book "is a work in Jewish conservatism" and that it is "an exercise in religious traditionalism." What he means is that the employment of science and secular philosophy in the context of the exposition of a sacred religious concept is nothing novel but, rather, represents the continuation of an established practice called "Jewish philosophy," a practice that accompanied rabbinic culture

for over 1,000 years. Fair enough. But let us look at the validity of this claim to historical continuity. The interreligious debates of the Baghdad renaissance of the ninth century C.E. allowed the politically powerless Jews to participate as equals in an intellectual exchange. Like everyone else engaged in this debate they drew on Greek philosophic arguments as a neutral referee that allowed them to argue for the divine authority of their revealed tradition in spite of the historical and empirical evidence to the contrary (to wit, the loss of their ancient state). Modern Jewish philosophy also derived its political impetus from the apologetic context in which it was conceived. The Mosaic legislation had been historicized, but the jury was still out on its historic value. Samuelson's practice of Jewish philosophy, on the other hand, lacks discernable political urgency. Or is it an argument against religious fundamentalism? But, then, why not make it more explicit? What is the point of Jewish philosophy after the demise of anti-Semitism, after the full integration of Jews into Western societies, and after the establishment of a Jewish state as a formidable military power? More accurately, whereas the medieval and modern philosophers of Judaism defended the dignity of Judaism, Samuelson seems to have nothing to defend. Has Jewish philosophy finally become a purely academic pursuit, an end in itself, a study of truth for its own sake?

Deprived of its political urgency and apologetic undercurrent, Jewish philosophy seems reduced to the leisurely and somewhat vacuous question of the "believability" of its historical positions. The answer to the believability question, whatever it may be, indeed seems to satisfy a purely theoretical interest. Yet how valid is it as a theoretical interest? Is it not rather disingenuous to suggest, as Samuelson does, that one needed the entire arsenal of "traditional Jewish sources" in order to arrive at the conclusion that revelation in the strong sense is "not a reasonable belief" (p. 237)? It is safe to assume that we knew this before we read the book, and it is therefore reasonable to assume further that the author knew this before he sat down to write it. If it is not the debunking of a tradition that has already been debunked a hundred times, then what is the real point of the argument? In my opinion, the author's true intention can be gleaned from the quotation at the conclusion where he cites a verse by e. e. cummings:

come, gaze with me upon this dome
of many colored glass, and see
his mother's pride, his father's joy,
unto whom duty whispers low
"thou must!" and who replies "I can!" (p. 241)

If I understand correctly, what Samuelson means to show us is that, contrary to the assumptions of radical secularists and especially

contrary to people who only believe what they see, there is no reason not to believe in something one does not see, especially if filial piety commands one to do so. It is quite acceptable, even for a modern scientifically minded person, to don phylacteries and pray to God in answer to the revelation that our ancestors are said to have experienced and about which we know nothing more than what Scripture and tradition tell us. Is it reasonable for modern man to accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven? Yes, especially if he is Jewish and feels a sense of obligation to do so. *Revelation and the God of Israel* is therefore first and foremost Samuelson's "I can," his *confessio judaica*, a modest one to be sure but a no less assertive one for that matter.

In light of this result, it is no longer surprising that Norbert Samuelson spends little time on proving the philological soundness of his readings of the historical positions (from the Bible to Rosenzweig). For his personal confession it is sufficient to run through what he takes as the essential points of the historical texts that he is most familiar with. As long as we know that this is what he is doing, we do not need to hold him to a different standard. I just wonder, though, whether the publisher should not have flagged the difference between a personal confession of faith and a philologically sound reading of classical sources.

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