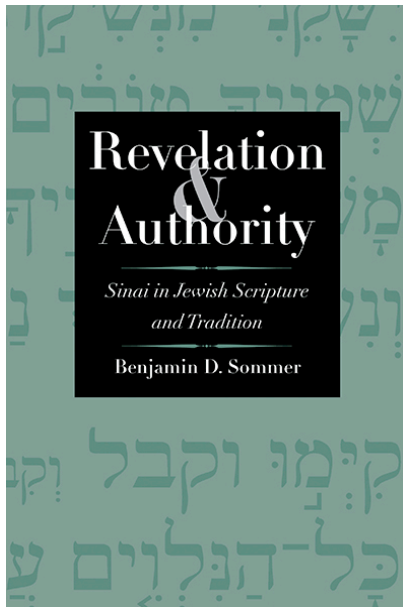


RBL 10/2016



Benjamin D. Sommer

Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition

Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 440.

Cloth. \$50.00. ISBN 9780300158731.

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When I received this volume, I did not expect that I would read it in one shot, but having started with the introduction I decided to put aside my other tasks temporarily. The book appeared to address fundamental issues that are relevant to Judaism as well as Christianity, and its comprehensive approach seemed to be quite inspiring.

The book contains original insights expressed in clear terms that will help readers from both religious backgrounds to develop a more balanced view on the authority of the Bible. The author is professor at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Although he has Jewish readers in mind, he takes the work of Christian biblical theologians seriously. I appreciate the honest way in which Sommer confronts the issues concerning the status of Scripture. He does not take commonplaces for granted but discusses them critically. Also, he treats possible objections to his own approach with sincerity. Having read the whole book, I am critical of several conclusions, but I still appreciate the innovative way in which it addresses questions that are tacitly bypassed by most biblical theologians.

Sommer regards Scripture as a translation, the product of human efforts to describe God's self-revelation. Therefore, it contains not only divine but also human elements. Sommer hopes that this approach to revelation and Scripture will enable contemporary

communities to rejuvenate Jewish law and to render it more compatible with their modern worldview, while maintaining their loyalty to God. Sommer evaluates postbiblical innovations remarkably positively. He argues that Jewish theology cannot construct teachings concerning God and his will primarily on the basis of Scripture but will always read Scripture along later Jewish writings that are no less sacred than Scripture itself.

Chapter 1 describes two fundamentally different approaches to the Bible. Religious Jews and Christians expect Scripture to disclose insights on an existential level, due to its supposed connection to a divine source. Biblical critics, however, treat it as an artefact that does not differ essentially from other ancient writings. Many of them believe that it was composed of different sources and that it contains imperfections and contradictory details. Also, they are quite critical of the classical Jewish and Christian interpretations of the biblical texts and wish to recover what these texts intended to disclose to their first audiences. Although Jews and Christians may experience such an academic approach as a threat, Sommer is convinced that they do not need to reject the methods of modern scholarship if they want to continue reading the Bible as Scripture. Pointing out that Jewish theologizing is characterized by dialogue and debate, Sommer stresses that seeing the Bible as sacred does not require feigned naïveté and turning off one's critical attitude.

Chapter 2, by far the lengthiest of the book, discusses the question of how the revelation of God and his will took place at Mount Sinai. Right at the beginning Sommer describes his personal unease with the idea that the Pentateuch is sacred, for instance, when it appears to be highly patriarchal or when it describes God as sweeping away the innocent together with the guilty or when it seems to condemn homosexuality. Such aspects make it difficult to believe that the Pentateuch is divine in its entirety.

In Sommer's view, the "stenographic" theory of revelation, which implies that the Pentateuch records God's utterances word for word, is not as biblical as many traditional Jews and Christians believe. The many inconsistencies establish the Pentateuch to be the product of multiple human authors. Remarkably, some of the most apparent contradictions are found in the highly relevant section Exod 19–24. Sommer expresses some doubt with regard to the classical Documentary Hypothesis (16, 46, 50), which claims that the Pentateuch was composed of the sources J, E, D, and P. Sommer is well aware of the innovative approaches of David Carr and others, but still he decides to base his discussion of the biblical evidence on the recent version of the four-sources theory as propounded by Baruch Schwarz.

Especially in the passages ascribed to the E source, Sommer finds ambiguity with regard to the question of what the Israelites heard and saw at Sinai. The source suggests that

Israel's knowledge of God and the law did not come directly from heaven but resulted partially from human interpretation. According to E, God's קול played a decisive role during revelation, but this Hebrew word may relate not only to a human voice providing specific information but also to an overwhelming noise. Also, it is dubious whether the people heard the Decalogue directly from God's mouth: the refusal of the terrified people to listen to God's voice (Exod 20:18–22) is possibly supposed to have occurred at the beginning of the Decalogue's proclamation, not after it (see participle ראי in 20:18). Remarkably, the introduction to the Decalogue in Exod 20:1 does not reveal to whom God spoke the text of the Decalogue. Finally, the remark that the people "saw" God's קולות "voices/thunders" suggests that the way in which God communicated was extraordinary, not similar to communication between humans. Comparable ambiguity is found with regard to the writing on the tablets. No one but Moses saw what was written on the first tablets, and it is unclear whether God actually wrote the text on the new ones (34:1) or whether the writing was done by Moses (34:28).

Despite the uncertainties regarding the precise delimitation of the E source, Sommer concludes that E deliberately encourages its audience to wonder how God revealed the law, either directly and stenographically or by human mediation. In his view, the second option comes close to the "participatory" theory of revelation developed by Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Joshua Heschel. These Jewish thinkers regarded the Bible as a human response to God's act of revelation but believed that, despite its human wording, it is possible to sense the divine in what is humanly written. This line of thinking implies that the authority behind the law remains fully divine but that the specifics of any given rule are due to a human translation of the revelation into language. Just as a translation from one language to another never matches the original precisely, Scripture reflects revelation but also contains flaws and imperfections.

Having shown that P and J suppose that all lawgiving was mediated through Moses, Sommer argues that D intends to answer the questions regarding the character of revelation raised by the text of Exodus. In Deut 4–5, it is clear that at Sinai God's "voice" (קול) transmitted words (4:12) and that the Israelites heard the Decalogue directly from the mouth of God. (Sommer regards the reference to mediation in 5:5 as secondary.) Only after the proclamation of the Decalogue do the Israelites ask Moses to mediate (5:25). Sommer describes E's approach to revelation as "minimalist" and D's approach as "maximalist."

Jewish views on the revelation of the laws appear to diverge. Some sages argued that God revealed the entire Decalogue directly to the people, but others stated that the people heard only the first two commandments from God's mouth. Maimonides argued that God's "voice" differs fundamentally from human voices and that Moses did not hear

specific laws from the mouth of God. In Sommer's words: "He apprehended something divine that no other human had apprehended, and on the basis of that apprehension Moses composed the law" (84). Sommer admits that it may seem unjustified to posit a connection between the theology of E and Maimonides's rejection of the idea that God spoke as humans speak, as the latter reflects Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thinking. Still, he suggests that the undeveloped ideas of E recur in full flower with Maimonides, Rosenzweig, Heschel, and other Jewish thinkers. In any case, there appears to be a discrepancy between D's description of revelation, which is so dominant in the Pentateuch, and Maimonides's emphasis on Moses's intermediary role.

Chapter 3 goes on to describe the "participatory theology of revelation" as it took shape in Jewish tradition. Sommer stresses that, according to this approach, the biblical revelations were nonverbal but definitely not devoid of content. According to Rosenzweig, God's nonverbal revelation included two fundamental elements, God's self-identification "I am YHWH" and his command "Love me." Israel concretized the abstract demand (*Gebot*) by creating the laws (*Gesetze*) of the torah. Although Heschel's position on the issue is more ambivalent, he suggested that revelation always takes place in dialogue, with each side influencing and being influenced.

Sommer is inspired by Rosenzweig and Heschel but also by the earlier sage Maimonides when arguing that Moses was not a stenographer who received precise words from heaven. He argues that the human authors of the sources of the Pentateuch attributed their own insights to Moses, which reflects humility instead of mendacity: these authors were convinced that something extraordinary had happened at Sinai and sincerely believed that their own ideas ultimately resulted from God's revelation to Moses.

Despite its assumed divine origin, Sommer claims that putting aside part of the legislation is inevitable in view of its contradictions. Exodus 12:8–9, for instance, directs the Israelites to roast the Passover offering, but Deut 16:6–7 requires that the offering be boiled. Such tensions can be explained by Rosenzweig's distinction between *Gebot* and *Gesetze*, but also by Heschel's distinction between the heavenly torah and the earthly torah, the earthly torah being no more and no less than an approximation to the heavenly torah. Even the Talmud implicitly admits that the Pentateuch is not fully divine when it forbids applying certain parts of the biblical legislation, such as the command to execute a rebellious son (Deut 21:18–21).

Sommer admits that his own ideas go some steps further than those of Heschel and Rosenzweig and that they would be troubled by the downgrading of the Bible that he proposes. In Heschel's thinking, robust notions of obligation and dedication play a decisive role. In the case of Rosenzweig, this may at first seem to be different because of

his emphasis on autonomy and personal choice, but this emphasis reflects Rosenzweig's ideal of truly free acceptance of God's sovereignty, without external compulsion, certainly not a rejection of obedience as such.

In chapter 4 Sommer argues that the classical Jewish distinction between Scripture, known as the Written Torah, and the later rabbinic traditions, the so-called Oral Torah, is misleading. Religious Jews assume that both stem from revelation at Sinai but commonly regard the Written Torah as having been revealed in its entirety and, therefore, as more authoritative than the Oral Torah. Sommer, however, shows that several passages in rabbinic literature break down the boundary between the two. Some sayings express the primacy of the Written Torah, always without denying the importance of the Oral Torah, but surprisingly others accord greater priority to the Oral Torah. Sommer goes a step further than classical Judaism by subverting the distinction between Scripture and tradition completely, denoting Written Torah as part of the larger entity, Oral Torah. According to Sommer, the boundary between Bible and tradition is blurred not only in rabbinic texts but also in Scripture itself. The formulations of Scripture are no less human and tentative than those of the Oral Torah, and, just like the Oral Torah, Scripture contains voices that supplement, criticize, and contradict other voices within the same textual corpus. Like many later works of rabbinic Judaism, the Bible offers a mix of revelation, reflection, and discussion. Thus it constitutes a formative instead of a normative canon, an anthology worthy of study and contemplation, just like rabbinic traditions.

Chapter 5 addresses the question of whether revelation is ongoing throughout Jewish history. In Judaism it is not uncommon to assume that Oral Torah continues to develop, but the idea that postbiblical tradition is divinely inspired is expressed only rarely and with great caution. Heschel and Rosenzweig, for instance, can say that the "today" of the revelation at Sinai must be experienced as "today" by Jews of all generations, but they reject the idea of continuous revelation and tend to deny the legitimacy of innovation. In his discussion of the biblical evidence, Sommer shows that, while P describes lawgiving as a durative process, D limits revelation to the days of Moses: God spoke only at Sinai, and nothing may be added to the words that Moses spoke in his name (Deut 4:2; 13:1). Although this suggests that the law cannot be improved over time, Sommer points out that D's own revisions of older biblical laws implicitly legitimizes the idea of innovation, thereby suggesting that a flexible approach may also be assumed in later times.

In the crucial chapter 6 Sommer describes his "modern" Jewish approach to Scripture. He regards the Bible as the first rabbinic work, distinguishing contradictory biblical voices that can be associated with similar voices of later Jewish sages. A difference from later

rabbinic works is that the Bible does not identify the voices that it contains, but modern biblical scholarship is able to describe the schools of thought that were behind them.

Sommer demonstrates that in Jewish biblical exegesis centrifugal approaches were prominent. Small units consisting of no more than three successive verses, not the larger literary units, were regarded as the main unit of expression. On the other hand, there were also unity-seeking forces trying to harmonize contradictory verses, but these were less widespread than the atomizing form of reading. Scripture also manifests centrifugal trends, with most of the Pentateuch giving no indication that laws needed to be reconciled, and centripetal tendencies in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, which seek to harmonize the contradictory laws of the Pentateuch.

Rosenzweig and the Protestant Biblical theologian Brevard Childs regard Scripture as a literary unity and focus on the final form of the text. They do not deny the intellectual legitimacy of biblical criticism but focus on the work of the redactors instead of the sources they incorporated. Sommer objects that “there is no reason to see the anthologizer as more sacred, more authoritative, or even more interesting than the anthologized” (231). He believes that the scholarly approach of Julius Wellhausen and Baruch Schwartz is closer to the atomistic biblical interpretation of midrash than the canonical approach of Rosenzweig and Childs.

The last chapter shows that in Judaism something has always remained unaffected, despite the disputes and innovations: all biblical and later Jewish texts affirm that Israel owes covenantal loyalty to a single deity, the God who elected it, and that this loyalty implies the observance of a law. Antinomian thinkers such as Paul were written out of Jewish tradition, which shows that the notion of legal obligation is indispensable to any Jewish theology. This continuity encourages Jewish communities to find ways to obey God in their contemporaneous contexts. Innovation is required, and the classical halakic system of the rabbis may become obsolete, but the traditions must be taken seriously, knowing that in the end new readings may turn out to be improvements but may also prove to be misreadings.

Not being an expert in Jewish theology, I will limit my reaction to the issue of Scripture’s authority. I share Sommer’s observation that the Bible expresses ideas that we can no longer accept. Even for conservative theologians the Bible has aspects that are irreconcilable with their own thinking. It is important to admit this and to reflect on it rather than to sweep it under the carpet. As Sommer clearly shows, we should not feel obliged to brainwash ourselves in order to embrace biblical truths. We do not need to repeat naïvely what offensive biblical passages suggest with regard to the character of God or the position of women or the punishment of rebellious sons.

However, this raises the central issue of authority. When we reject aspects of biblical thinking, on what basis do we do this? Where does our conviction that an offensive biblical text cannot be divine originate? How was the new criterion “revealed” to us? Do we reject biblical ideas on the authority of talmudic or other Jewish sages? Do we reject them on the basis of the New Testament writings? Is our rejection due to progressive insight or to the Enlightenment? I do not reproach Sommer for not having answered these questions, because these are questions that I cannot easily answer myself, but the issue of the provenance of our criteria deserves attention in our future reflection.

Further, the occurrence of biblical ideas that we regard as obsolete or even offensive requires an explanation. Nowadays we know so much more about the ancient Near Eastern context in which the biblical texts were composed. Biblical narratives and laws have clear counterparts in other ancient Near Eastern texts. For instance, the incorporation of laws from Codex Hammurabi into Exod 21:1–22:16 shows that the authors of the biblical texts were children of their time. Sommer mentions such correspondences only in passing. However, many aspects of biblical thinking that are incomprehensible to present-day readers can be explained against an ancient Near Eastern background.

Sommer does not pay much attention to the theory of divine accommodation, although it played a significant role in Maimonides’s thinking, for instance in his discussion of sacrifices (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32). This ancient theory, which can already be found with several church fathers, intends to clarify why God in Scripture did not always adequately reveal his true nature or give laws that do not reflect his ultimate will, such as the sacrificial laws, which according to Maimonides were a concession to ancient Israel’s expectations but later became obsolete. In view of the correspondences between Scripture and other ancient texts, it may be apt to consider whether the theory of divine accommodation can be rejuvenated. Further, is it justifiable to suggest that the divine shines through, especially where the biblical texts break away from the usual ancient Near Eastern conceptions?

In Sommer’s discussion of the authority of Scripture, the problem of its imperfections and contradictions stands out, but it remains unclear whether the Written Torah has advantages over the later Oral Torah. Sommer does refer to the lasting significance of Scripture, especially the idea of God’s love for Israel and Israel’s obligation to be loyal to God, but he does not clearly indicate when the later Jewish and Christian traditions run the risk of narrowing down the rich variety of biblical voices. The wish to avoid elements that cannot be integrated easily or that provoke self-criticism may result in inflexibility. In order to recover Scripture’s surprises and inspiratory aspects, it is necessary to reread Scripture with new eyes and to put the rooted interpretations aside.

In my view, it is highly important to maintain the distinction between Scripture and tradition, not only in religious communities but also in biblical scholarship. Within Christianity, the Old and New Testaments may not only be read as two parts of the same canon but should also be studied separately, thereby demonstrating that the New Testament does not seamlessly complement the Old Testament. In the case of Judaism, the Written Torah should not be put on a par with the Oral Torah. Of course, it is interesting to point to unexpected interpretations of biblical texts. Sommer mentions the example of Deut 5:22, which in several targums—contrary to the Hebrew text—implies that God did not stop speaking after pronouncing the Decalogue. Sommer recognizes wholeheartedly that the interpretation of the targums is secondary and does not reflect the intention of the Hebrew text (199, 202, 204–5). In general, however, I wonder whether biblical texts can still speak in their own voice when we blur the distinction with their classical, but sometimes obscuring, interpretations.

Therefore, to a certain extent the approaches of Jewish Karaism and Christian Protestantism are cogent. Even if we believe in the authoritative status of tradition, regrettably we must admit that tradition may impose its own values on the sacred writings. Instead, close reading of the biblical texts may enable Scripture to speak for itself. It may show that the redactors incorporated the older sources quite consciously into the transmitted text. If we, with Rosenzweig, Childs, and others (229), concentrate on the transmitted text, it will show unity as well as diversity. That may be confusing, but in the end Scripture will undoubtedly surprise and inspire us more than before.

Sommer's book is thought-provoking. It bridges the gap between the academic and the religious approaches to Scripture. The relevant questions that it raises are all too often bypassed in Jewish and Christian theology, which is strange in view of the prominent role that they played in the thinking of Maimonides, Heschel, and Rosenzweig as well as several Christian thinkers. Therefore, this book deserves to be taken seriously. I am grateful to the author for making me familiar with his creative thinking.