



**“It was Not with Our Fathers that the LORD made this Covenant, but
with Us:” Historicism and Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought**

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Introduction: Setting Up the Challenge of Historicism

What is Revelation in the Jewish Context?

Revelation is defined as “an act of revealing or communicating divine truth.”¹ In the Jewish tradition, revelation often refers to God's revelation to the entire people of Israel at Mount Sinai, as it appears in the 19th and 20th chapters of the book of Exodus in the Pentateuch. This revelation is an expression of the covenant between God and the Israelite people, in which God promises to care for the Israelites if they follow God's commandments: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5). The details with which the text describes this revelation give the impression of a factual, historical event: “Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:11). The text states that when the event occurred, it was a miraculous occasion where nature defied norms, inspiring dread and terror in the Israelites: “On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.” (Exodus 19:16). God then shared the covenant with the Israelites, which is frequently assumed to be the written Torah.

The Torah itself centres the experience of revelation as the basis for worshipping God and observing God's commandments: “The LORD said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: With Me, therefore,

¹ “Revelation,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revelation>.

you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold” (Exodus 20:19-20). Revelation is understood to be the event that makes the Jewish people distinct; within Jewish tradition and culture it is understood as the revealing of the mission of the Jewish people. God through revelation shares what God wants of the Jewish people, and what divine qualities the Jewish people should emulate. Sinaitic revelation as manifestation of the Biblical covenant and faith comes to receive different interpretations in the Middle Ages.

Pre-Enlightenment Conceptions of Revelation: Yehuda Halevi and Maimonides²

Medieval Jewish philosopher Yehuda Halevi understands revelation as the event of revelation at Sinai in his book *Sefer Kuzari*. For Halevi, proof of Judaism’s veracity comes not from philosophical rationalization, but from belief.³ Religion is not something to be deduced from rational epistemology, but from experience. For Halevi, this is the purpose of revelation – to provide an event that will convince the Israelites of God’s existence through an intense experience: “God, however, desired to remove this doubt [of God’s ability to communicate and share the covenant], and commanded them to prepare themselves morally, as well as physically, enjoining them to keep aloof from their wives, and to be ready to hear the words of God.”⁴ For Halevi, what makes revelation believable is that it was witnessed by all the Israelites at the event: “[B]ecause this grand and lofty spectacle, seen by thousands, cannot be denied.”⁵ Multiple witnesses confirm the accuracy of the event, since such a public event cannot be attributed to an individual's imagination. Abstract philosophical argument is not a needed or even relevant

² This Halevian and Maimonidean distinction of how revelation occurs as the basis for modern thinkers’ relationship to the historicism of revelation is the original idea of Professor David Novak.

³ Trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld, “Sefer Kuzari,” Sefaria, accessed April 21, 2021, https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Kuzari?lang=bi, II:49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I:87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I:88.

theological proof for Halevi. For Halevi, being rooted in history is what makes revelation factual and accurate. If revelation is historically factual for Halevi, then its contents are as well, which the Torah outlines as applicable to all Jews of all generations: “It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today” (Deuteronomy 5:3).

Another medieval philosopher that attempts to understand revelation is Maimonides. For Maimonides, revelation is not an event, but a level of intellectual apprehension that is connected to God. This can be seen in Maimonides’s conception of prophecy, which is another form of communication between God and humanity. Maimonides describes prophecy as an overflow from God through intermediation of the Active Intellect, a concept of divine transmission of knowledge borrowed from Aristotle.⁶ The Active Intellect filters divine transmission of divine wisdom into forms that human beings can comprehend. Only after perfection in both rational and imaginative faculties can God decide whether to allow for prophecy or not.⁷ The uniqueness of prophets lies in their outstanding ability to connect to the Active Intellect than most, and this is due to their perfection of their rational faculties as well as imaginative faculties. For Maimonides, receiving divine communication is an intellectual endeavour, not a large-scale historical event. For Maimonides, revelation is an integral foundation of Jewish faith, but that the nature of it being a public event and its historical timing are not crucial. In his *Introduction to Chapter Helek*, Maimonides enumerates thirteen principles of faith, including the belief that the Torah was given from heaven.⁸ This terminology does not tie revelation to Sinaitic revelation,

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, vol. 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1963), 369.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁸ Yehuda Eisenberg, “Haqdamat Rambam le-Pereq ‘Heleq,’” *Da’at – Limudei Yahadut ve-Ruah*, 2004. <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/rambam/hakdamat-2.htm#6>.

showing how Maimonides does not rely on history for Torah's validity but instead the capacity of the most perfected human being to receive pure and eternally binding divine communication and commandments. The contrast of Maimonides' supreme intellectual apprehension and Halevi's historical grounding of revelation becomes significant when philosophical challenges and critiques of history begin in the Enlightenment.

The Problem of Historicism

Over the course of the Enlightenment period, the European intellectual community began to reconsider its traditional stances on many authoritative structures, including that of history. Rationalism became an ideal heuristic for differentiating between useful societal frameworks and useless ones, specifically in the form of rational empiricism. This method of approaching epistemology and facts led to the challenge of history: how can one be sure of the occurrence and accuracy of previous events, especially ones that provide the basis for important ideological and sociological frameworks? Even if it is possible to gain certainty of these historical events, why does an event in the past lay any claim upon those living in the present? These questions gave rise to the ideology of historicism, which posits that since it is possible to contextualize historical ideas and events. Through the methodology of historical criticism, texts could now be read within the contexts in which they were written. Scholars now viewed historical ideas and events, even verifiable ones, in – and as products of – their original time and place, making it impossible to reinterpret them for different contexts, thereby questioning their authoritative legitimacy. Tradition passed on from generation to generation became an insufficient justification for belief in the Enlightenment context; lack of proof and rationally rigorous assessment were now sufficient for overriding previously foundational beliefs.

Recognition of the inability to prove previous events resulted in two different schools of historicism in the 19th century. First is that of historical relativism, which assumed that by events occurring in the past, there was no relevance or authority for those living now. Historical events were to be understood through the lens of historical contextualization of when that event occurred, and not beyond that. This meant that all events could now be reduced to when and what was occurring when they were recorded as occurring – thereby becoming stuck in history, as opposed to resonating past that moment. This included ideologies and philosophies as well, as they were understood to have been products of certain historical events. This meant assuming that values cannot be eternally binding, since the philosophy and ideology the values are derived from must be situated within their respective historical context. Deeming it impossible to affirm certain opinions as eternally good since they arose in the past could easily lead to a kind of moral nihilism.⁹ The second approach to historicism is ethical historicism, which can be understood as a kind of progressivism. In contrast to the moral nihilism that resulted from historical relativism, the ethical historicist approach still preserved a sense of morality, by suggesting that ethics is revealed throughout history.¹⁰ History progresses on a trajectory towards a better future, and all events and ideologies that stem from events in history slowly refine and perfect what came before them. History loses its total relativity, but previous ideologies and events are still deemed irrelevant. More problematically, ethical historicism can perceive previous historical events as more morally reprehensible than events occurring in the present and perceive past ideologies as more morally reprehensible than newer ideas, since they were created or occurred in an earlier stage of moral historical progress.

⁹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Brandeis University Press, 1988), pp. 138-161, 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141

In the post-Enlightenment period, historicism directly challenged the authority of religion, which was founded on the value of tradition and of trust in the past. Beginning to question the truthfulness of past religious history meant questioning current religious practice, as many religious actions and beliefs draw on past experiences and precedents. For Judaism in particular, this challenge of history manifested itself in two fundamental questions. First is the question of source criticism: If the Torah is suggested through historical criticism to be a document written by human beings in the Ancient Near East, how can one ascertain its divine credibility? If divine authorship cannot be determined, then the Torah should be treated like any historical document – susceptible to historicism. This means the Torah's account of Sinaitic revelation cannot be trusted to have occurred, and God's covenant with and expectations of the Jewish people are unclear and maybe even nonexistent. The Torah becomes a human document that is merely an artifact of the past instead of a text that should inform Jews in the modern day. The second question brackets historical criticism and asks: Even if revelation did occur, why should that be significant now? The text itself presents the covenant to be universal and timeless, however understanding it to be written in the past should limit its applicability. Why would an event in the past bind Jews today, millennia afterward? Even in the less relativist ethical historicist approach, this second question still threatens Jewish practice, as it makes the values conveyed in Sinaitic revelation inferior to what can be deduced as valuable in the present.

Historicism and Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought

Jewish philosophers of the post-Enlightenment period would now have to grapple with the challenge of historicism to earlier Jewish foundational belief. The challenge of historicism is more troubling for Halevi's account of revelation than for that of Maimonides'. Halevi's conception of revelation is inherently connected to history, while Maimonides' is more

theoretical. Halevi's use of a Sinaitic event that occurred in the past as religious proof seems not to be able to withstand historicism. Not seeing past events as ones that hold authority problematizes Halevi's religious framework which heavily relies on Sinaitic revelation as a historical event. All three philosophers covered in this thesis write their philosophical works with historicism in mind. It seems that all three interpret revelation at Sinai through the understanding of Halevi, meaning that they privilege the national-historical experience over an abstract intellectual prophecy.

The following thesis will analyze how Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Abraham Joshua Heschel respond to the problem of historicism. Buber utilizes the historical critical method in his understanding of biblical texts, yet still finds revelation to be possible by describing it as an ever-present relationship, thereby transcending the past and the trap of historicism. Rosenzweig dismisses historicism by not working with linear time altogether; the past and the present are deeply influenced by each other in a way that cannot be untangled, making contextualization of events and experiences challenging. Heschel suggests that applying historicism and using historical criticism is too reductionist of the religious experience. This is particularly true with revelation since it is an event in the past, but also because accompanied with revelation a built-in mechanism of interpretation, which demands applying biblical text to new contexts. All three philosophers have their own unique way of addressing historicism in order to preserve authentic Judaism as each of them sees it – some by interacting with historical criticism but not using it to come to historicist conclusions, and some by rejecting historicism in a religious context altogether.

Martin Buber: Revelation is One Moment of an Eternal Relationship

“Duties and obligations one has only toward the stranger: toward one’s intimates one is kind and loving. When a man steps before the countenance, the world becomes whole present to him for the first time in the fullness of the presence, illuminated by eternity, and he can say You in one word to the being of all beings.”

- *I and Thou* p. 157

“The literary category within which our historical mode of thinking must classify this narrative is the saga; and a saga is generally assumed to be incapable of producing within us any conception of a factual sequence.”

- *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* p.13

“Naturally we do not by this learn the real course of an historic event, but we do learn that in a definite age in a definite circle of tribe or people an actual relationship appeared between the believer and that in which he believes, a unique relationship and according to our perception, at a definite stage too, which also has to be designated unique, a relationship which embodies itself in a concrete event, which continues to operate concretely.

- *The Prophetic Faith* pp. 7-8

Overview

Buber reconciles revelation and historicism by minimizing the overall significance of revelation at Sinai, which Buber sees as one of many divine I-Thou interactions throughout Jewish history. The experience at Sinai is not unique because revelations occur constantly; what

is unique in Sinaitic revelation is that revelation had in fact already been occurring, but its recipients had been unaware until the Sinaitic moment. Revelation at Sinai merely reveals the constant revelation, as opposed to being a solely unique experience of divine interaction. This redefinition of revelation lies at the heart of Buber's response to the historicist challenge: if true revelation is continuous and unbound to a particular historical moment, then it is immune to claims of irrelevance and unreliability. By understanding the Sinaitic revelation as merely a groundbreaking example among many events of revelation, the foundational principle of the significance of Sinai is preserved, and Jewish tradition and practice is salvaged. Sinai instead becomes a marker of covenant as opposed to the ultimate experience of God.

Redefinition of History

Buber happily employs methods of historical criticism but insists that they do not necessarily diminish the significance of religious history. In the beginning of *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, Buber critiques the usage of the Documentary Hypothesis,¹¹ not by rejecting the validity in the potential of human or multiple authorship, but instead by calling for a different understanding of the history of religion. Buber believes that using history to convey truthful accounts is a fallacy, as it is impossible to determine objective accounts of any event.¹² For Buber, events recorded as history convey "...a relationship which embodies itself in a concrete event, which continues to operate concretely."¹³ They occur, but their endurance secures their significance, as opposed to their authorship. Buber already sees Biblical tradition as a weaving of different influences over many centuries and contexts, as this is the nature of any

¹¹ This is the theory by Julius Wellhausen regarding the origin of the composition of the Hebrew Bible, which became popular in the late 19th century. He attributes certain writing styles and themes to different authors of the text, opposing the possibility of divine authorship.

¹² Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

historical record. This makes the Documentary Hypothesis not particularly problematic to Buber, as discrepancy in authorship is inherent in any attempt at history.¹⁴ However, positing multiple authors of the scriptural text does not have to reduce the value of religion in Buber's view, for the purpose of religious texts and traditions is not to be strictly factual according to rational epistemological methodology, but instead to jointly create a "homogeneous image of a man and his work."¹⁵ For Buber, historical critical methods like the Documentary Hypothesis can be utilized, without having to conclude that Judaism is altogether irrelevant. Buber does not believe that the biblical texts can only be understood in the contexts of its composition, even if its authors lived in a different context than its current readers – as historicism suggests.

Buber believes that in order to convey this view of Biblical literature well, the term 'saga' fits the Hebrew Bible better than 'history' does, since it does not produce any expectation of chronological sequence.¹⁶ The biblical texts communicate ideas that are dramatic and didactic – they intend to shape communities and practices of the future, and are not records of the past.¹⁷ The recording of certain historical memories is not of the event, but of "historical reflection."¹⁸ These texts represent and convey the emotions of people going through or commemorating certain experiences. This entails some creativity and flexibility in contrast to strict truth-telling, as memory inevitably draws on the human imagination.¹⁹ Buber compares it to the creation of music, which has a more flexible sense of structure than history requires, and can still cause a meaningful response to be invoked by the modern listener.²⁰ Just as with music

¹⁴ Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, trans. Scheimann Richard, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 127.

¹⁹ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

or storytelling, “scientific dignity” would not be appropriate for properly assessing revelation, as revelation – like the rest of the Hebrew Bible – should be understood as saga. This encounter with God represents so much more than what history often is, making it transcend problems of historicism which would attempt to extinguish the power the revelation narrative has for the reader.²¹

Buber initially seems to say that biblical texts and traditions are something more than being subservient to history, but that they are still records of people’s experiences of certain events. It seems that Buber tries to balance acknowledging historical criticism as a discipline that could reveal when and how biblical texts were written and recognizing that the purpose of biblical texts is to share ideas that should not be limited to the time of their composition. Many of these biblical ideas stem from reactions to occurrences that did occur in the past, however these occurrences do not need to be proven to have occurred exactly as described in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical events may not have actually occurred as claimed, but probably are based on some kind of happening, since someone was moved deeply enough to attempt to record it. What matters for the religious reader is not the exact details of the factual occurrence but the emotional stirring that the text evokes and its didactic takeaway. This emotional response and the actions it inspires still hold regardless of historical accuracy.

Revelation as Constantly Occurring

In addition to asserting that not all events must be historically accurate since their narratives can evoke responses within the contemporary reader, Buber believes that the recording of Sinaitic revelation might be one of a past event, but that the action of revelation itself is actually occurring constantly. With understanding Biblical text as ‘saga’ in mind, Buber does not

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

see Moses as a conveyer of historical truth, but as an archetype of a person who recognizes God's presence, since God is present in Moses's innermost self.²² Since Moses is the traditionally the primary prophet and scribe of the Torah, Buber's understanding of Moses comes to inform Buber's conception of revelation: as interacting with God in the present.

Buber's philosophy is focused on the nature of the philosophy of dialogue. For Buber, relationships must be reciprocal in order for dialogue to occur.²³ This does not mean both parties must have a shared experience, as shared experience does not entail closeness; one can experience together without properly acknowledging one another.²⁴ All motives, goals, and means must be eliminated for the ultimate and authentic encounter – in order to just 'be' with the other one is in relation with.²⁵ Sometimes even words become barriers for proper reciprocity; they become jargon and lose the intent of the encounter those words are attempting to describe.²⁶ Buber is very concerned with making sure the other being encountered is not dehumanized to being treated as an object, or as deemed in Buber's terminology, an "It."²⁷ Addressing something as an "It" means it is an object to be used for personal gain, as opposed to encountering it as an end in itself. I-It relationships for Buber are inherently selfish, because they lack reciprocity and only the "I" benefits; the other being in relation is not viewed as its own independent entity. For Buber, by relationships occurring in the present, it is not possible for each party to be perceived as an object: "What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past."²⁸ By being present, there are no assumptions or expectations about the relationship, thereby making it the most

²² *Ibid.*, 170.

²³ Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

authentic and meaningful. In his work, *I and Thou*, Buber lays out three different kinds of relationships in the world: one with nature, one with other human beings, and one with spiritual beings.²⁹ It is essential for Buber that these are all I-Thou relationships, ones that do not negate our selves, yet still encounter the other in relation as their own “I.”

The I-Thou framing is foundational for Buber’s conception of revelation, as revelation is the I-Thou encounter between oneself and God, who Buber describes as “the eternal You.”³⁰ The ultimate I-Thou relationship is with God.³¹ Every other relationship is subsumed under the I-Thou relationship with God, which is a microcosm for all other I-Thou relationships.³² Since authentic relationships occur in the present, the I-Thou relationship with God must be a relationship that occurs in the present. Buber explains that the I-Thou relationship with God has been continuing since creation, and will continue to do so infinitely.³³ The relationship is always present, and therefore does not need to be determined by any deduction or proof.³⁴ Human beings can be aware of relationship with God is possible at any moment, with no previous expectations or spiritual preparation.³⁵ One is found instead of seeking, so as to avoid subsuming the other party into one’s desires and interests.³⁶

It is not a relationship of subservience; relationships being reciprocal entails that the God which one is in relation to is in need of that being, as creator and helper.³⁷ Perceiving the relationship as dependence would degrade the relationship, making it seem magical instead of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³² *Ibid.*, 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

real.³⁸ One does not accept or share content when in a relationship; one simply experiences presence.³⁹ Revelation should be understood as an intense encounter without means or expectations, as an ideal relationship: “Of course, he is the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I.”⁴⁰ The “I” must be kept intact for a proper revelation; we do not become funnels of the Divine, we are overwhelmed by its presence.⁴¹

Not only is the I-Thou relationship present, but the Thou is experienced in the fullest sense, meaning that the Thou transcends the limitations of space and time altogether.⁴² When encountering the Thou, one becomes a different person from whom one began the encounter as.⁴³ God’s first name to Moses at the burning bush actually conveys the Thou’s presence and eternity, as God is the ultimate Thou: “*Ich werde dasein als der ich dasein werde.*”⁴⁴ God can never be reduced to an “It,” as God is without limitation or measurement, or even experience.⁴⁵ Since God is the Thou one is in dialogue with in revelation, revelation then is not bound to context, as contextualization would limit the ultimate Thou.

Although revelation is constantly present, every community orients itself around some original encounter. This original encounter is an event where a response was made to a Thou, which by the original encounter being the community’s foundation, facilitates a continually renewed relational process or community members.⁴⁶ This orienting around an I-Thou

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴⁴ English Translation: *I will be there as the I who will be there.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

interaction makes the community itself a kind of revelation.⁴⁷ Revelation provides a calling and mission for a community. When relationship with God is not used merely as a tool for enforcing conformity, encounters with God create a foundational point of reference through which to confront the world.⁴⁸ This does not mean that revelation is temporal or limited, but that pragmatically using a revelation as a reference point is helpful for community arrangement. But revelation itself ultimately is a constant endeavour, and can look like an initial encounter, when instead it is the beginning of people as “I”s who live in this temporal world paying attention and acknowledging the possibility of interacting with God in an ever-present dialogue.

Revelation as Eternal – The Debate of Where to Begin

This raises the question of the significance of Sinai for Buber – why start here, if revelation is forever occurring constantly? Why not identify such a pinnacle revelation with Abraham, since he begins the monotheistic covenant?⁴⁹ Or with other prophets who convey connection with God? Buber himself connects the burning bush with Sinai, noticing the shared root of א.ל.ה. in Sinai and the burning bush or in Hebrew *seneh heboer*.⁵⁰ He sees this as the prefiguration of Sinaitic revelation, as it occurs on the same mountain and God’s name as the tetragrammaton appears for the first time to Moses as such at the burning bush.⁵¹ Buber also believes that the content of Sinaitic Revelation itself is not of paradigmatic significance and that the Decalogue is not a set of catechisms, but is an understanding of communal norms at the time

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁰ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, 39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

of its conception.⁵² Why then focus on Sinai at all – what makes Sinaitic revelation significant and foundational in Jewish belief?

Revelation as Constant, but with Covenant Beginning At Sinai

Buber concludes that revelation is present and not tied down to a singular event, yet that the beginning of the Israelite covenant occurs at Sinai, thereby differentiating between revelation and covenant. Revelation is constant, yet Sinai is the beginning of the Israelites as a communal entity calling God by a name, marking for the Israelites a significant kind of appearance.⁵³ By communally naming God, the Israelites become Israel, making their community relevant and purpose-driven, a theo-political entity.⁵⁴ Sinai as an event marks a covenant that is not a limited fixed agreement or connected to law, but is the confirmation of the commitment to a primary I-Thou relationship with God, that begins with Sinai even with previous initial contact with God.⁵⁵ It is the first covenant to connect an entire community to embrace duty to God and vice versa.⁵⁶ It is a “*supra-historical election*”⁵⁷ to be bound absolutely” in a particular relationship to Israel, thereby transcending the historical paradigm.⁵⁸ With this understanding, Buber sees the significance of the yearly performed Passover seder as confirming that although technically an occurrence, the significance of Sinai and what it represents in relation to revelation is not to be internalized as merely a single-time occurrence, and instead is something to constantly re-live.⁵⁹

⁵² Martin Buber, *On The Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 106.

⁵³ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, 45-46.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 122, , 115.

⁵⁵ *The Prophetic Faith*, 29-30.

⁵⁶ *The Kingship of God*, 123.

⁵⁷ Italics preserved from the original.

⁵⁸ *The Prophetic Faith*, 56.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Buber seems to understand the creation of the Israelite community connected to God via covenant as an I-Thou revelation. Although technically a group of individuals, Buber seems to understand the Israelites as a single entity that is able to engage in an authentic I-Thou relationship, which is understood to be two singular “I”s interacting with one another. The Israelites in covenant according to Buber actually represent a paradigm for all of humanity.⁶⁰ This covenant marks the Israelites pursuing the ultimate I-Thou relationship, and pledging to cultivate it even past their first acknowledgement of encounter.

Not Legally Binding

Buber’s conception of the I-Thou connection between God and Israel is intimate, however it also lacks expectations. Buber does not see how words can be part of a true I-Thou encounter due to the limitations of language. Words often minimize the grandeur and significance of expressions, which means that utilizing them could weaken the relationship.⁶¹ One in relationship does not receive content, but merely lives in presence. Essential in his framework of relationship, Buber maintains that ultimate and authentic presence cannot expect obligation: “Duties and obligations one has only toward the stranger: toward one’s intimates one is kind and loving.”⁶² Buber’s statement conveys his assumption that law and kindness are incompatible. Seeing a sense of being commanded and goodness as opposites seems contradictory to most of Jewish thought up until Buber’s time. It is a powerful point Buber is attempting to make regarding the egalitarian mutuality between God and Israel.⁶³ Yet, it seems that this conception of connection with God that is not legally oriented is incredibly different

⁶⁰ *On The Bible: Eighteen Studies*, 63.

⁶¹ *I and Thou*, 123.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶³ *The Prophetic Faith*, 63-64.

from the understanding of the biblical prophets and even of the Torah itself, as the Torah is understood as a book of law or literally *instruction*. Buber constantly asserts in *I and Thou* that encounters often provide a sense of mission after being a changed person, but one wonders how that mission can be clarified without law or words – What exactly does the God of Buber do and want of us? As Abraham Joshua Heschel sharply critiques: “A Jew cannot live by such a conception of revelation. Buber does not do justice to the claims of the prophets. So I have to choose between him and the Bible itself.”⁶⁴

It is possible to read Buber as not completely antinomian. His frustration is not with law itself, but with when it is binding beyond the present. He sees covenant as a kind of *mitzvah le'shaah* – a commandment that only applies in that moment. However, one wonders is if that is sustainable for continuous religious practice, let alone clear what exactly that covenant is sharing. Buber’s conception of revelation with God in an I-Thou matter is theoretically beautiful and empowering, but does not seem interested in clarifying the content of revelation, making Buber’s theological conception not necessarily clear in how to execute its goals, and not even necessarily distinctly Jewish if it is without commandments. For Buber, following commandments seems to be an existential choice that can rise out of relationship, but should not come from necessitating certain praxis that often accompanies religious practice. It seems that Buber wants to be necessarily vague so as not to enforce a specific kind of individual authentic relationship for every person, since authentic relationships should not be prescribed. Even if this freedom of religious expression through relationship is appreciated, it seems difficult to pedagogically express such a sentiment in a religious context that often requires structure and expectations of the practicing individual.

⁶⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 385.

Conclusion:

Buber's constant revelation and singular event of covenant formation minimizes the significance of the historical event, which is susceptible to historicism. Buber utilizes historical critical approaches of reading biblical texts because he does not see divine authorship as necessary proof or evidence of the authentic experience of revelation. Revelation is a constant engagement between the "I" of humanity and the "Thou" of God, which may at times be marked in the past, but is merely concretizing a revelation that is constantly occurring and therefore constantly relevant even past the recording of Sinaitic revelation specifically in the Pentateuch. Buber understands revelation as both relationship with God, providing a refreshing way to perceive the role of God in religion, which is often merely authoritative. However, this new sense of the role of God creates questions regarding authority and expectation, making it unclear what revelation and even covenant entails for the individual or community in dialogue with God.

Franz Rosenzweig: Revelation as a Commanding Moment in Eternal History

“And so there is nothing new in the miracle of Revelation, nothing of a magical intervention in the created Creation; on the contrary, it is entirely sign, entirely a making visible and a becoming audible of the Providence originally hidden in the mute night of Creation, entirely – Revelation. Revelation is therefore always new only because it is immemorially old.”

- *The Star of Redemption* pp. 120-121

“The poem flatly states that it is Judaism’s secret to transmute love into hope for redemption:

‘Your loving is most beautiful while you await Him who will redeem you.’

Rosenzweig’s commentary on Halevi’s Poem “God Speaks,”

- *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi* p. 155

“Whatever can and must be done is not yet deed, whatever can and must be commanded is not yet commandment. Law [Gesetz] must again become commandment [Gebot] which seeks to be transformed into deed at the very moment it is heard.”

- “The Builders,” *On Jewish Education* p. 85

Overview:

For Rosenzweig, Buber’s portrayal of an intimate revelation which stays in the present but has no sense of command is deeply flawed. Additionally, Rosenzweig’s conception of revelation does not need to be as bound to the present in comparison to Buber’s. Rosenzweig is deeply troubled by the academic discipline of historicism, which he does not believe to be completely honest about its integrity in its application to historical events, and is concerned by the nihilism that could arise from its implementation. Rosenzweig rejects that history is linear,

thereby making the difference between past and present experiences not so clear from one another, making historicism completely absurd in the ability to distinguish the seemingly relevant from the irrelevant. He is concerned about the today-ness of revelation, which for him is a present experience that can only be contextualized and processed due to past experiences. Rosenzweig sees historicism gaining popularity due to the larger philosophical problem of the inability to gain objective knowledge. Objective knowledge up until the Enlightenment had relied on the past because it was based on previous data which then is only contextually relevant.⁶⁵ How do we connect newfound extreme subjectivity to clarity of unlimited objectivity, which faith and truth usually relies on?⁶⁶ Rosenzweig finds faith in the empiricism of experience, making revelation an experience in the present that then must be understood via communal schemata of the past in order to be properly implemented. This allows for Rosenzweig to actually be able to articulate the content of the divine interaction in addition to thinking critically about how to feel grounded in a concept of divine interaction or revelation to begin with.⁶⁷

Rejection of Historicism and the Pragmatic Necessity of Revelation

Before analyzing *The Star of Redemption* in which Rosenzweig's focus is on articulating how revelation manifests for the individual, it is important to understand Rosenzweig's stance on the historicism of his time. Rosenzweig attended university when the problem of historicism was a fruitful and relevant discussion by many of his professors. When Rosenzweig saw how many of them were debating either between historical relativism or even progressive ethical historicism, he was horrified. After surviving as a soldier in World War I, Rosenzweig was

⁶⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 111.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

skeptical of any progression in ethical knowledge found in history, as he was living in modern times and saw the atrocities that could still occur. With these serious concerns about the ramifications of historicism in mind, Rosenzweig does not feel a sense of obligation in his philosophy to try and accommodate his ideology to historicism's criteria, as he sees so many other flaws accompanying it. He also feels that the historicism of the time is not being intellectually honest in its lack of subjective humility, by assuming that they know better of the past than those in the past themselves. This lack of self-awareness Enlightenment thinkers' own subjectivity makes historicism paradoxically impossible or inauthentic according to Rosenzweig.⁶⁸

With this understanding, Rosenzweig sees revelation as an opportunity to combat the relativism that could arise when implementing historicism. Revelation is pragmatically important for Rosenzweig, as a response to the potential nihilism of history: "Rosenzweig argues that the philosophical attitude is both profoundly true and profoundly dangerous...The philosophic attitude, taken in isolation, is deeply destructive, argues Rosenzweig, in *The Star and beyond*, precisely because it cannot ground public life."⁶⁹ Unlike Buber, revelation for Rosenzweig is not a solely "I" individual experience, but one deeply connected to community.⁷⁰ Revelation is an opportunity to orient history to give it meaning, as opposed to relying on history itself to navigate towards a desirable goal. Rosenzweig sees revelation as a useful tool for this more so than reason (which Rosenzweig even terms as paganism, as it derives from the natural world),⁷¹ because revelation provides a sense of purpose and orientation that emotionally resonates more

⁶⁸ Leora Batnitzky, "On the Truth of History or the History of Truth: Rethinking Rosenzweig via Strauss," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2AD): pp. 223-251, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40753266>, 230.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁷¹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism," in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Brandeis University Press, 1988), pp. 138-161, 144.

than rationalism does.⁷² This stance does not reject the importance of the present either; it merely attempts to intersect events of historical weight with present historical contexts.⁷³ This means that any historian, regardless of their stance about how or if revelation occurred, cannot deny the historical impact of the Bible in history thus far, and even if this is not a deciding factor in legitimacy, it most definitely should be something to consider.⁷⁴ Taking the cultural and religious legacy of the Bible into account when assessing the legitimacy of revelation does not have to make attaining truth more difficult or tainted. Batnitzky explains: “Rosenzweig argues that truth is conditioned by the historical parameters of the interpreter. This does not mean, however, that truth is ultimately subjective; it means that objectivity itself is possible only by way of our subjectivity.”⁷⁵ It is naive to assume pure objectivity can ever be attained anyway, so it is better to be upfront with the subjectivities we are rooted in so as to most successfully get closer to objectivity.

Additionally, Rosenzweig (at least explicitly more so than Buber and Heschel) had an affinity for Yehudah Halevi, for whom revelation is an experience as opposed to a certain level of knowledge ascertained. In addition to translating and providing commentary on Halevi’s poetry,⁷⁶ Rosenzweig appreciated Halevi’s entire Jewish outlook. For Halevi, practicing the Jewish faith is not something that can be questioned like many isolated aspects of religion or culture, but instead a way of life.⁷⁷ Rosenzweig saw himself as a modern incarnate of Halevi’s

⁷² “On the Truth of History or the History of Truth: Rethinking Rosenzweig via Strauss,” 227.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Entitled in the original German *Jehuda Halevi: Zweiundneunzig Hymnen und Dedichte*.

⁷⁷ Franz Rosenzweig and Richard A. Cohen, “Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi,” in *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi*, ed. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Thomas Kovach, Eva Jospe, and Gilya Gerda Schmidt (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. xi-xxxii, xvi.

mission,⁷⁸ by attempting through adult education and writing in Germany to convey a Judaism that is whole and without the need to be in tension with any other idea.⁷⁹ Halevi's Judaism was an integral and undividable part of the Jewish individual, making it not subject to intellectual criticisms in the same way that one does not question how the human body functions. It is no surprise that Halevi's influence made the problem of historicism even more troubling for Rosenzweig, since Halevi's conception of revelation is one of experience that occurs in history in the past. Yet, like Halevi, Rosenzweig saw revelation as an uncompromisable factor of Jewish identity, making it his mission to convey a meaningful understanding of revelation that was also philosophically sound.

Structure of *The Star* as Guide to Revelation's Significance

In order to understand Rosenzweig's approach to revelation better, one must understand the structure of his work, *The Star of Redemption*. It is divided into three parts that represent important moments of time for the Jewish people: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.⁸⁰ Initially, one might understand these to be chronologically progressive; that Revelation occurs only after Creation does. However, it is also possible to understand the order in a dialectical fashion. This would mean engaging with history in a non-linear fashion, almost like a spiral where each previous section is understood better as the layers progress; gaining more understanding with new experiences as opposed to re-understanding. Batnitzky argues that with each new section, the previous one is better understood because it is put into context of the newfound knowledge.⁸¹ This means that only after Revelation occurs is there a sense of

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

⁸⁰ The capitalization of these terms is in spirit of Rosenzweig's own terminology, as the terms symbolize much more than their common usage. When used in the Rosenzweigian context, they will be capitalized.

⁸¹ Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 64.

grounding regarding the true meaning of Creation, and that Revelation cannot be properly understood until Redemption is achieved. Rosenzweig puts Redemption after Revelation in order to show us that Revelation does not occur in the vacuum of individualistic experience. It is something that can only really occur in the context of being part of a community, as laid out in the messianic Jewish and Christian communities in Part 3 of *The Star*.⁸² This somewhat paradoxical chain touches on a deeper philosophical point of Rosenzweig's regarding the inherent human limitation of attaining total knowledge – that some inherent skepticism will always be present until what is grasped has already occurred in the past.⁸³ This also matches Rosenzweig's overall contempt with Hegelian progressivism, which he felt more pessimistic about after seeing the horrors of WWI, the most modern and therefore seemingly most morally 'good' time period.⁸⁴

Revelation according to Rosenzweig reveals unlimited Providence, an unconditional and unequivocal relationship between God and man in the universe.⁸⁵ Providence for Rosenzweig is what Creation is: The Creature's relationship with the Creator. Revelation provides insight into creation, by helping creations recognize that it has been created and thereby related to the Creator, as opposed to just existing as a creature who does not know or even care to know its origin. Yet at the same time, Revelation is impregnated into Creation, as Creation was always created by a Creator. This creation entails a relationship and potential for future dialogue, which can occur when the Creature acknowledges its Creator. In this sense, Rosenzweig is similar to Buber, who sees that Revelation is always present, and that moments of Revelation as

⁸² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ "Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism," 145.

⁸⁵ *The Star of Redemption*, 105.

experienced by us may feel new and exciting, but they are just revealing what was always present and just previously not noticed. Rosenzweig clarifies that this conception of Revelation is actually true for all miracles,⁸⁶ seeing them as demonstrations of predetermined constraints of natural laws, making them less conceptually problematic.⁸⁷ This means that Revelation was anticipated in Creation, making it not magical at all, as Revelation is showing what was already there since the creation of natural laws.⁸⁸ Revelation is reflective in this sense, as it is an experience that is responding to what is already there. Yet it still needs to be iterated for the relationship to be experienced since Creation itself is not self-explanatory.

Revelation in Relationship with Eternality

Rosenzweig sees the universe as eternal, which might initially seem to contradict a sense of creation – how could something eternal also be created? But for Rosenzweig, creation is not a moment in time, but instead the exposure of a relationship to the Creator. This happens constantly due to the universe’s eternity.⁸⁹ By constantly being created in this sense of communication of being created, this entails meaning that the moment of Revelation in history is constantly being re-lived in the present as well. History for Rosenzweig also can be understood as eternal, unlike the colloquial understanding of history having a clear beginning and end. However, creation is insufficient to mark a relationship with God because without the context of Revelation, Creation can get lost in self-negation.⁹⁰ The constant renewal makes every universal

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

moment a particular one as well.⁹¹ This does not make a specific beginning and end, but more so an opportunity to introduce a concrete personal existence into history.

Revelation also demonstrates that Creation was not arbitrary.⁹² It is important to note that Revelation is intentional; even though God transcends limitations, God chooses to be in this particular relationship with a finite party.⁹³ The experience of Revelation is analogous to love, another experience that entails a kind of dependence but not diminishing of the other. Rosenzweig asserts that constantly loving in the present moment makes love increase. This increase is the permanent fidelity to that one moment of the present is what makes it a living love. And God loves us, without implying that God has needs, since love is self-transformation and happiness, which are not necessary attributes.⁹⁴

Revelation and Commandments

Although it is a moment constantly lived in the present, it is important that the moment of Revelation is not all-love; it is a love at a specific moment.⁹⁵ Love in the present makes Revelation an act of specific or particularistic love, as opposed to constant all-alove, which would better describe Creation.⁹⁶ Revelation is love being commanded. It is difficult for loving God to turn the commandment into a law, since law provides the structure and continuity of a commandment. Yet, the commandment of “Love Me” is the most present and important commandment.⁹⁷ Revelation occurring in the present means in the love of “today,” which is a

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

microcosm for how all commandments should be understood.⁹⁸ Loving something makes that something certain, which makes God manifest through loving the Jewish people.⁹⁹ Revelation makes God no more secretly beyond lived experience; God blossoms into existence in Revelation. By God loving His¹⁰⁰ creation, He is making it His.¹⁰¹

Rosenzweig's terminology when discussing the *mitzvot* as commandedness as opposed to law is intentional. When responding to Buber's concerns about the nature of obligation in Revelation entailing obligation when intimate relationships should be about being present, Rosenzweig critiques Buber's understanding of Law. Rosenzweig sees Buber's concerns about law to be ones concerning the Enlightenment's portrayal of the Orthodox Jewish conception of law: "Is the Law you speak of not rather the Law of the Western orthodoxy of the past century?"¹⁰² He sees Jews feeling the sense of searching for justification in their practice ever since Mendelssohn arose. Before Mendelssohn's response to the Enlightenment, the question of 'why' regarding Jewish practice was never a pressing issue for practitioners; if anything it was one question amongst many, and not serious enough to totally uproot the existing Jewish foundational framework.¹⁰³ For millennia, understanding that six hundred thousand Jewish ancestors stood as witnesses at Sinai was an important fact in the historical sense, but this fact has not been the driving force of Jewish belief.¹⁰⁴ The fact that the tradition holds the value of every Jewish soul transcending generations and time is understood to have been at Sinai is more

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰⁰ There has been hesitancy up until now to give god gendered pronouns. For the sake of comprehension of Rosenzweig's thought it was felt to be necessary here, merely out of pragmatism.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁰² Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 77.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

of a ‘fact’ in Rosenzweig’s eyes, in the sense that it is more foundational and validating to Jewish understanding.¹⁰⁵ This matches Rosenzweig’s overall dissatisfaction with historicism – its reductionism does not properly address the concerns of religion which are more pedagogical and emotionally resonant: “These are pseudo-historical, pseudo-juristic, pseudo-logical, pseudo-ethical motives: for a miracle does not constitute history, a people is not a juridical fact, martyrdom is not an arithmetical problem, and love is not social.”¹⁰⁶

How then are we to understand what is expected of us? Instead of accepting Enlightenment conceptions of what the law is and then feeling constrained, we can understand it by learning and experiencing it.¹⁰⁷ As Buber preaches in his understanding of I-Thou relationships, experience is the best way to become intimate with something, and for Rosenzweig, this can be the same approach with the law as well. Through learning the texts and practicing them, as opposed to merely theorizing about them, they become part of our consciousness, and feel less like laws but more so ways to navigate the Jewish experience. Rosenzweig talks about the role of custom in Jewish culture, and suggests that maybe instead of seeing commandments as laws, they should be similar to customs, which are part of the fabric of the Jewish milieu instead of being seen as constraints.¹⁰⁸ This can help create a revolution in understanding commandments in a way that addresses Buber’s concern of intimacy without throwing out what makes Jewish revelation important and unique: it’s call to action. More explicitly, Rosenzweig says: “Law [*Gesetz*] must again become commandment [*Gebot*] which seeks to be transformed into deed at the very moment it is heard.”¹⁰⁹ By using this terminology

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

instead of law, talking about commandments makes these values a living reality, which then by action entail their eternal practice and significance.¹¹⁰ This is especially because commandments entail communal action; commandments are not just upon the individual. This also entails that they are not just opportunities to fulfill obligations, but that they become avenues to manifest our love of God and vice versa as mentioned in *The Star*, to have the possibility to recreate and rekindle the intimacy of revelation by performing these acts.

Seeing commandments as manifestations of divine love is also important in light of historical criticism. Commandments are not merely supposed to be historically factual, but represent an eternally relevant bond that is understandable to the modern person. Rosenzweig is not bothered by biblical criticism questioning the Mosaic authorship of the Hebrew Bible; in fact Rosenzweig himself acknowledges it is unlikely that Moses wrote the Torah.¹¹¹ Yet, this does not affect the reception of the commandments, as the redactors of the Masoretic texts do not take away from the divine love in the commandments themselves.¹¹² The divine truth of these statements is not deduced by using historical-critical methodology, but by a relationship beyond that, namely revelation. Rosenzweig blames the assumption of drawing truth in merely the historical-critical understanding of text on Martin Luther's Protestantism. Protestantism's foundational principle of *Sola Scriptura* determines religious truth from the primary biblical text only, seeing any interpretation of the text – including that of the rabbinical tradition – as drawing out sources of truth about the text externally and thereby inauthentically, through commentary or

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹¹ Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, "The Unity of the Bible: A Position Paper Via-À-Vis Orthodoxy and Liberalism," in *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 22-26, 23.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

relationship.¹¹³ Yet, interpretation of text is a source of truth drawn out of one's own existence and felt within the reader, which no historical-critical method is unable to scrutinize, thereby avoiding historicism. By Judaism not only being a theology, a religion, or a culture but instead an entire way of life, the Jewish practice deduced from revelation is one that cannot be attacked with historicist concerns.¹¹⁴

Why Judaism?

Rosenzweig does not necessarily clarify why Jewish revelation is how he decides to orient himself in the world. He definitely critiques Islam and paganism in *The Star of Redemption*, and also is troubled by the Christian elitism in the German Hegelian milieu. However, these concerns could be easily dismissed if one were to understand Rosenzweig's approach as a kind of phenomenological description of his own experience. Emulating his Jewish role model Yehuda Halevi, Rosenzweig was not interested in a philosophical treatise that explained why one must follow Judaism *per se*, but more so relying on the empiricism of experience as validating his belief system. This meant relying on his own Jewish experience, and trying to cultivate Jewish experiences for his students. This definitely is more intellectually sound than claiming objectivity in a post-Kantian world where all objectivity is questioned, but how does one control what one experiences, and who is to say someone else does not experience differently? Rosenzweig sees communal affiliations as providing paradigms for understanding experiences, but not everyone feels connected to their ancestral communities, and sometimes people change communities altogether. Rosenzweig himself almost converted to Christianity,¹¹⁵ but how was he to know he would have an overwhelming experience of *Kol Nidrei* on the eve of

¹¹³ Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, "Scripture and Luther," in *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 47-69, 59.

¹¹⁴ "Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi," xvi.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Yom Kippur that would change his mind? Although not as relative as what historicism entails, Rosenzweig by providing a phenomenological account of experience to determine religious affiliation overlooks a critical assessment of the foundation of Judaism itself outside the everyday living of the already devoted Jewish practitioner. It is appreciated that Rosenzweig's conception of Jewish identity is so all-encompassing that it seems absurd to question, but does this version really speak to everyone, or is it merely a hermeneutic for those already situated in Rosenzweig's understanding of the Jewish belief system? Rosenzweig might respond that philosophically convincing someone of Jewish faith is inauthentic, but it is important to note that merely relying on experience to validate religious practice makes dialogue difficult and fairly personal.

Conclusion

Rosenzweig believes that Buber's conception of revelation is missing content, thereby adding in the concept of commandments that also pleases the twentieth-century Enlightenment autonomous thinker, who is wary of the dogmatism of law. He also orients his thought about revelation more so in communal history than Buber does, due to his concerns about the relativity of historicism. He sees commandments as microcosms for the relationship God has with the Jewish people, that helps Jews understand our connection to the Creator by seeing that they are in relation with something beyond them. Understanding the commandments as opportunities for relationship with God makes them protected from historical-critical methodology contextualizing them so that they are only temporarily meaningful. Revelation is part of an eternal conversation and connection with God that is difficult for people to experience individually in their human limitations, but within the text of community can be schematized into an eternal context, the same context in which God exists.

Abraham Joshua Heschel's Co-Revelation: Seeing the Past in Present Tense

"...[R]evelation signifies not some particular historical disclosure authenticated by miracles, but the progressive self-revelation which God makes of His existence and of His character in the divinest experiences of the human soul."

- *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, p. 209

"Sacred history may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line of past and present, as an attempt to see the past in the present tense."

- *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, pp. 211-212

"It is clear that the intention was to determine that the understanding of Torah was entrusted to the Sages; that is, the Torah was not given exclusively from the mind of God; it is refracted also through the interpretation of the Sages."

- *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, p. 660.

"We must distinguish between factual truths and eternal verities. Every fact depends on time, and when its time has passed, the fact disappears. Yet there are moments that are like eternity, and what happens in them transcends time. The passage of time brings forgetfulness; the present moment makes us forget the moment past. Two moments in time cannot coexist. They crowd each other out. But the opposite is the case with eternity, for there is not forgetting at the throne of glory, and for God, past and future come simultaneously. So the giving of Torah is past as a factual truth, but endures as an eternal verity. God's voice, as it emanated from Mount Horeb, was never muted."

- *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, p. 670.

Overview

Heschel, more so than Buber and Rosenzweig, is explicit about the problem of historicism regarding revelation. This could be due to Heschel's role as a public theologian, arguing for the present relevance of Judaism on the public stage by polemicizing against modern critiques of religion. He states the problem of historicism regarding religion explicitly in his book *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*: "Is there any meaning to our being loyal to events that happened more than three thousand years ago?"¹¹⁶ Heschel validates the concern that an ancient experience might not reasonably bind Jews in the present. After all, contemporary Jews did not make these commitments – who is to say what was promised then would be accepted now?

Heschel's response to this question is manifold, showing the significance of this question to him in light of the assumed superiority of secular rationalism in the modern world. His attempts to answer from multiple angles show how the question of historicism is also deeply significant to Heschel himself, who felt strongly that a God who is moved and seeks out man is necessary in a post-Holocaust world in which the basic decency and goodness of humanity is questioned. Heschel first responds by rejecting the use of the scientific method to analyze the Hebrew Bible in a reductionist manner. In fact, he harshly dismisses the use of historical-critical methods to delegitimize the Hebrew Bible's account of revelation as a category mistake. Heschel then explains how wonder is a necessary but insufficient component of the revelation process. Heschel then ties in these points to explain how revelation did occur in history, but also is constantly re-affirmed through the constant relevance of the Hebrew Bible, which endures by

¹¹⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 213.

design through continuous interpretation. Heschel plays with the notions of past and present in order to transcend the concerns of historicism.

Biblical Criticism

Heschel begins confronting historicism by addressing biblical criticism that questions how one can verify that an event like revelation occurred, then addressing how revelation occurring in the past still affects us today. This is significantly different from how Buber and Rosenzweig approach historicism. Buber does briefly critique the historical-critical method of biblical criticism in his introduction to *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* because of its reductionism, leaving biblical characters and traditions without any moral or didactic merit.¹¹⁷ Heschel's critique, however, is more robust, most likely due to his concern as a theologian employing a more polemical approach in response to the effects of biblical criticism in the cultural milieu. Biblical criticism is employed for a very specific kind of historicist critique. It does not question how to deduce implications of eternal legitimacy of Sinaitic revelation, but instead the validity of the biblical narrative of revelation altogether to describe a historical event, assuming it is composed of combined authorship in different time periods and includes scribal errors (as the Documentary Hypothesis implies). More concretely: If the Hebrew Bible is not divinely composed, and is actually a human document, then why trust its account of Sinaitic revelation (or anything for that matter) that claims to eternally bind the Jewish people? Could a humanly composed document be trusted to deliver an eternal truth?

Heschel responds to this kind of historicism by suggesting that using these reductive and somewhat scientific ways of analyzing the Biblical text is a kind of category mistake. Heschel does not reject the existence of scribal errors, or even of multiple authors, but he is saying that

¹¹⁷ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, 8.

using these critiques as a way to challenge religion entirely, as opposed to merely being a way to coldly analyze the texts, are misguided. Heschel goes on to explain that the Hebrew Bible is a kind of expression of reaction to revelation, making the inconsistencies in the Hebrew Bible not indicative of revelation never having occurred, any more than as an opinionated analysis of a political event does not mean the political event did not occur. This is especially the case for revelation as opposed to other historical events, as the biblical text is trying to capture an ineffable moment that cannot be reduced into a textual format accurately and authentically.¹¹⁸

Heschel differentiates between conceptual thinking and situational thinking in order to highlight the category mistake.¹¹⁹ Conceptual thinking is detached and theoretical, while situational thinking involves experiences that move individuals. Heschel thinks that the category mistake of dismissing the validity of religious experience by using historical criticism of the biblical text arises from a conceptual-thinking approach to the issue, when in fact it should be approached situationally. Source criticism focuses too much on the textual integrity of the text, without realizing that the text is not what determines religious experience or proves the veracity of an event – it is merely an attempted report of a phenomenon. More sharply, Heschel asserts that the Bible is not about metaphysics or concepts (which are topics that would be susceptible to the concerns of historical criticism), but is about history and events, which are subjective phenomenological experiences.¹²⁰

This category error is due to literal-mindedness. Source criticism takes words at face value, without considering the possibility of deeper significance or the inability to convey

¹¹⁸ *God in Search of Man*, 20.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

transcendent events through words.¹²¹ Heschel sees the words used to describe interaction with the Divine as indicative, meaning that they are not meant to describe but instead convey something that can be intuited yet not fully understood.¹²² Their purpose is to evoke a response, rather than express clarity.¹²³ Revelation is not like an ordinary event which is easy to report, but an experience that language cannot accurately depict, no matter what language is used. There is a sense of the ineffable, that goes beyond reason and beyond normal language statements and critical assessments.¹²⁴ For Heschel, as for Buber and Rosenzweig, the historical-critical analysis of biblical texts is not helpful for understanding religious phenomena; however, in addition to historical criticism being too reductionist, revelation in particular is an event that words or any kind of human terminology cannot properly describe.

Furthermore, the faith of religious experience is not subject to historicism because the events of faith have irreversible ripple effects. Heschel uses the example of the Golden Calf to demonstrate this: the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf and abandoning Moses' mission is not due to disbelief, but to a lack of faith.¹²⁵ Faith entails not just belief in the occurrence of an historical event, but an ongoing project. This is what distinguishes an event like Sinai from any other ancient phenomenon; it is clear that faith in this event had and has historical impact today, similar to other landmark events like the Battle of Marathon or even the Congress of Vienna.¹²⁶ These events did not just occur; people react to them and these reactions affect the frameworks in which people interact with the world. This distinction between kinds of historical events that just

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

occur and those that have larger impact affects how one assesses their factuality: What kind of evidence would be needed to even prove revelation anyway?¹²⁷ This is because the significance of such an event is measured differently. Revelation is experience-oriented and difficult to reproduce because authenticity of the moment is necessary, like many other significant human experiences which are difficult to assess after their occurrence.¹²⁸

Revelation is a unique kind of experience not only because of the recognition of its impact in history, but because God is involved, transcending any kind of conceptual explanation which source criticism entails. “God is not a scientific problem,” says Heschel, as God is ineffable.¹²⁹ But does something surpassing definition entail irrationality? Heschel suggests that it does not, seeing the inability for God or revelation to fit into systematic categories not as irrational, but transcending the dichotomy of rational and irrational entirely.¹³⁰ More explicitly than Buber or Rosenzweig, Heschel focuses on the intellectual problem of attempting to assess any kind of truth statements about God and how God interacts with the universe, since God is beyond human comprehension to begin with.

For Heschel, constricting revelation to chronological categories of time is also a category mistake.¹³¹ The Torah does not need to all be written at the same time (or by the same author) in order to still be significant. Revelation is paradoxical because it is an experience in which God – who definitionally transcends categories – interacts with the Jewish people. Revelation lasted a moment, yet the text is permanent in “time and space.”¹³² By existing in the physical world, Jews

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 259.

are beholden to the past, but God is not, and this seeming inconsistency need not be explained since revelation transcends reductionist categories.¹³³ For Heschel, revelation is a kind of miracle that does not require a rational explanation, since miracles definitionally go beyond human understanding.

Heschel does not actually address the concerns of multiple authorship.¹³⁴ He refuses to engage with the question seriously because he thinks it is based on a reductionist assumption that is unfounded. The reductionist assumption suggests that revelation is understood to have occurred chronologically in the past, and therefore must entail its irrelevance. Heschel thinks that revelation is ineffable and impossible to capture in language, which is too complicated and special an experience for reductionist assumptions to deeply challenge. Engaging with the question seriously would imply that Heschel saw some truth in it. By not addressing it, Heschel shows his reader that the question of source criticism distracts from the larger concern: that contemporary Jews and people in general do not experience God properly in their own religious lives. If one had a deeper sense of wonder, attributing validity to the source criticism concern would be absurd even to contend with.

Wonder

Heschel makes a distinction between wonder and revelation, in a way that significantly differs from Buber and Rosenzweig. Buber and Rosenzweig merely see revelation as a self-revelation of God to humanity, as opposed to an experience that requires active human participation in the revelation experience.¹³⁵ Even for Rosenzweig who vigorously argued that

¹³³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 672.

¹³⁴ Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Indiana, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 119.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

revelation entails commandments, the act of human participation in understanding and implementing these commandments is done after revelation is experienced.

For Heschel, in order to be eligible to receive and understand revelation, one must be able to experience God in everyday life and interaction.¹³⁶ This is narrowed down to the three essential tasks of worship, learning, and action: worship – in order to sense the presence of God in the world and in things, learning – in order to sense God’s presence in the Bible, and action – in order to sense God’s presence in sacred deeds.¹³⁷ Sensing God’s presence is termed as “wonder” by Heschel.¹³⁸ It is a response to the sublime, which is the deep mystery of sensing a meaning greater than oneself.¹³⁹ Wonder for biblical man specifically is a kind of “pre-apprehension of God,”¹⁴⁰ in which the Divine is understood as the cause of the greater meaning behind the sublime.¹⁴¹ It is a constantly occurring experience when found and appreciated. Wonder as a response to the mystery of the universe that Heschel terms “the sublime” is something any human can achieve regardless of their religious background,¹⁴² although Heschel laments the lack of wonder in the modern disenchanted world. Wonder shows people that there is something beyond themselves, making people ponder what their purpose in the world is.¹⁴³

For some, wonder seems to be all that one needs in order to interact with the Divine, and can even be a sufficient explanation of what revelation is. There is acknowledgement, and even presence. Heschel thinks wonder is integral,¹⁴⁴ but he goes further; now that one has experienced

¹³⁶ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 30.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 33.

¹⁴¹ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 40.

¹⁴² *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 104.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴⁴ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 128.

wonder at God's presence in God's creations, one has the opportunity for dialogue with the Divine.¹⁴⁵ What is the Divine trying to tell the individual? And how does the individual respond? Heschel sees the significance of the response in addition to God revealing Godself to humanity, as true revelation. Awareness of God through wonder is an integral first step, but it is insufficient; religion becomes a response to wonder, making revelation not just an experience of encounter but one of dialogue between God and the one in wonder of God.¹⁴⁶

Revelation

Revelation for Heschel is the covenantal relationship¹⁴⁷ between God and humanity – God desires to communicate with human beings, and the addressed community attempts to ascertain the contents of this communication. God does not merely dictate God's demands, for by communicating with people, God becomes vulnerable to misinterpretation which makes it more of a conversation than one of authoritative instruction.¹⁴⁸ For Heschel, revelation as dialogue with God is important not simply to establish communication with the Divine, but in order to secure freedom and goodness for all of humanity through the content of the communication.¹⁴⁹ God's establishing of a divine voice shows humanity that history is not arbitrary because there is an ideal direction in which humanity should orient themselves toward.¹⁵⁰ It is essential for Heschel that God seeks out humanity and not merely the other way around.¹⁵¹ God cares about the execution of revelation since God wants to ensure human involvement and comfort in the process.

¹⁴⁵ Dror Bondi, *Ayekah? "she'elato shel Elohim ve-targum ha-masoret be-haguto shel Avraham Yehoshu'a Heshel* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2008), 188.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁴⁷ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 68.

¹⁴⁸ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 134.

¹⁴⁹ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 170.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁵¹ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 101.

As established earlier, revelation is ineffable, meaning that it is futile to assume it can properly be conveyed in speech. What then is the status of the Hebrew Bible, if it cannot properly convey an ineffable experience? Heschel answers that the Torah asserts that revelation *somehow* happened, but it does not force the reader to accept a certain model of how it was revealed, alluding to revelation being indicative rather than descriptive.¹⁵² Heschel reminds the reader not to get lost in metaphor, suggesting that the story of revelation at Sinai is powerful pedagogically through the intensity of what it represents.¹⁵³ The purpose of the biblical account is to introduce its readers to the mystery, not bind them to a specific systematic theology.¹⁵⁴

The existence of Torah is proof of the living God by being a product of some kind response to revelation.¹⁵⁵ Heschel contentiously writes: “As a report about revelation the Bible itself is a *midrash*.”¹⁵⁶ Heschel’s usage of the term “*midrash*” does not mean solely human composition, as the term usually indicates when used to describe a certain genre of rabbinic literature. Instead, it refers to a commentary that uses midrashic methods of allusion to describe a primary occurrence.¹⁵⁷ *Midrash* entails a commentary, meaning that it entails an interpretation – something that can be implemented regardless of specific context and time.¹⁵⁸ This description of commentary is important as Heschel is not suggesting a continuous revelation, as many misunderstand him to suggest through his position/claim that wonder occurs all the time. It is essential that revelation occurs in history, as an event that truly happened in the past.¹⁵⁹ The

¹⁵² *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 185.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 180, 181.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; Held also notes that Heschel is fairly inconsistent or unclear regarding what actually was conveyed at Sinai regarding content and how it was perceived by a human audience (p.108), but maybe this is testament to revelation being an opportunity to point to the mystery than fully explain it.

¹⁵⁵ *Ayekah? ” she’elato shel Elohim ve-targum ha-masoret be-haguto shel Avraham Yehoshu’a Heshel*, 187.

¹⁵⁶ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 185.

¹⁵⁷ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 108.

¹⁵⁸ *Ayekah? ” she’elato shel Elohim ve-targum ha-masoret be-haguto shel Avraham Yehoshu’a Heshel*, 190.

¹⁵⁹ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 261.

Bible is the recording of this event in history and marks the beginning of receiving the word and spirit of what God wants.¹⁶⁰ However, in Judaism, the Bible is not enough. There is the Oral Torah that elaborates on the written text. The Oral Torah is more dynamic and is not tied to one event – it continues from the moment of revelation to this day. This makes Heschel’s view one of continuous interpretation, rather than continuous revelation.¹⁶¹ By constantly commentating on what was conveyed at the event of Sinaitic revelation, the dialogue becomes dynamic and continuous.¹⁶²

The Hebrew Bible may have occurred or have been written in the past, but it is not meant to be immutable, perfect, or confined to books.¹⁶³ It must be applicable in every generation, which can only be done with a continuous process of Oral Torah.¹⁶⁴ In its very structure of being determined by the majority, the Oral Torah’s *halakhah* or legal system is meant to be affected by different generations in their respective presents.¹⁶⁵ This continuous interpretation entails that “[t]he Bible is an ever present reality”¹⁶⁶ and that this human participation in the process makes it almost like a “co-revelation.”¹⁶⁷

For Heschel, continuous interpretation entails seeing how commandments apply to Jewish life via ritual practice. Like Rosenzweig, Heschel sees the commandments as opportunities of love and connection with God, but he also uses Buber’s language of encounter:

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁶¹ *Ayekah? ” she’elato shel Elohim ve-targum ha-masoret be-haguto shel Avraham Yehoshu’a Heshel*, 196.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁶³ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 276.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁶⁵ *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, 578.

¹⁶⁶ *God in Search of Man*, 235.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

We do not need words in order to communicate with the mystery. The ineffable in us communes with the ineffable beyond us. We do not have to express God when we let our self continue to be His, the echo of His expression. Resorting to the divine invested in us, we do not have to bewail the fact of His shore being so far away. In our sincere compliance with His commands, the distance disappears.¹⁶⁸

For Heschel, the result of us participating in the interpretation is one of praxis. He disagrees with Buber's assumption of alienation that comes with obligations from intimate relationships.

Continuous Interpretation and Historicism

By employing continuous interpretation, Heschel makes the question of historicism absurd. Heschel's conception of revelation occurs in the past, but also has built into it a necessarily present interpretation or understanding of application. Unlike other historical texts, the biblical text is constructed in a way that demands constant re-understanding, making it impervious to historicist claims. By blurring the distinction between past and present through continuous interpretation, Heschel erases historicism's questioning of the past's legitimacy is erased. Heschel's conception of revelation then is somewhat paradoxical: "Sinai is both an event that happened once and for all, and an event that happens all the time."¹⁶⁹ The continuous interpretation also entails action – it is not merely about what happened, but what is expected of Jews in every generation.¹⁷⁰ In fact, Sinaitic revelation would not be sustainable enough for Jewish practice if its significance was merely about the event, which would only be captivating for so long.¹⁷¹ Heschel uses the analogy of a sculpture to explain the significance of the event in

¹⁶⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 131.

¹⁶⁹ *God in Search of Man*, 215.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

history: similarly to how a sculpture must latch onto a stone or form in order to manifest, revelation needs to latch onto an event in order to be envisioned.¹⁷² Heschel laments that if one were to reduce revelation to the event alone it would be as bad as deeming God as corporeal, since it would mean that the all-capable God would be interacting in an event that is temporary and limiting.¹⁷³ These limitations would also be susceptible to the historicist critique, limiting this event to the past, without any connection to the present and to the modern religious person. Heschel blurs the differentiation of past and present by creating a past event accompanied with a constantly present interpretation, which then transcends the problem of historicism. Heschel does this by focusing on God's point of view, in a similar way to Rosenzweig's concept of eternity of history, seeing the covenant as constantly occurring through God's eyes: "Sacred history may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line of past and present, as an attempt *to see the past in the present tense*."¹⁷⁴ Through God's eternity, it becomes impossible to have a chronological conception regarding Sinai, even when due to human limitation time is perceived otherwise: "So the giving of Torah is past as a factual truth, but endures as an eternal verity. God's voice, as it emanated from Mount Horeb, was never muted."¹⁷⁵

In different places, Heschel oscillates between Sinai being a single event and then also an event that occurs constantly. The above sources provide a kind of synthesis, which Shai Held comes to as well regarding Heschel's thought: "Here we have moved from an ontological-theological claim – Sinai is always happening – to a normative one: we must engage Torah in

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

¹⁷⁵ *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, 670.

such a way that it is ‘*as if*’ it were revealed this very day.”¹⁷⁶ Sinaitic revelation is an event and not a process, but to the Divine perception which transcends chronological categories it is eternal. The imperative of the Jewish people is to bridge the gap of Sinaitic revelation being perceived by the human eye as occurring in the past, with acting and attuning contemporary Jews to the text like it is occurring in the present.

This explains how rabbinic sources view all Jews of all generations as being present at Sinai – in a specific time in history, God was revealing the eternal, which God experienced then as the present.¹⁷⁷ It is almost like love; although a wedding occurs in a previous moment in the past, marriage is a constant and ever-present renewal of the vows made on the wedding day. Through this method of acknowledgement of a past event but continuous interpretation, Heschel transcends the challenges of historicism.

Conclusion

Heschel, through a phenomenological account of the religiously oriented person, shows how wonder makes one receptive to revelation. Yet revelation is not enough – for Heschel, revelation must be made impactful through interpretation in order to make what is revealed relevant in everyday life. History is still linear for Heschel, yet by mixing the past with the present through implementing active interpretation of previous revelation in each generation, Heschel makes revelation not something merely relative to the historical context of its occurrence. Heschel’s approach empowers humanity to take charge in revelation, as it is a partnership in which one should not be overwhelmed by God’s presence to a point of paralysis or

¹⁷⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The Call of Transcendence*, 131.

¹⁷⁷ *Ayekah?*” *she’elato shel Elohim ve-targum ha-masoret be-haguto shel Avraham Yehoshu’a Heshel*, 205.

speechlessness. Revelation may be ineffable, but human beings must participate in keeping it alive.

Conclusion

Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Abraham Joshua Heschel all provide rich philosophical approaches to combat the threat that historicism poses to traditional Jewish ideas of revelation, each coming with their advantages and flaws. Buber and Rosenzweig both replace a chronological view of history with a non-linear model in which past, present, and future all merge. Through this sense of timeless history, being in the present for authentic relationship and dialogue makes all encounters with God contemporarily relevant. Heschel, on the other hand, still maintains a linear conception of history, but uses interpretation as a tool that makes past events such as revelation eternally relevant and thereby constantly re-experienced. Rosenzweig and Heschel see commandments as an integral aspect of their conceptions of revelation, with an encounter with God necessarily leaving its participants with practical demands. Buber is less committed to the idea of commandedness out of fear of losing individual autonomy and authenticity of the I-Thou relationship. Rosenzweig's conception of eternity is one that is difficult for the human experience to relate to, as the human experience is finite.

Each theology comes with its flaws: Buber's potential for antinomianism, Rosenzweig's only being able to justify Jewish practice phenomenologically, or Heschel's oscillation between Sinai being a single event or something continuous. Yet, these flaws are a reminder that trying to comprehend God as human beings is a highly limited and maybe even futile endeavour. Yet, all three attempt to put words to such an experience. They do so not out of a sense of haughtiness in their abilities to perform the impossible, but because the impossibility of a thoroughly articulated theology should not stop one from trying. Even in their limitations, all three philosophers use their theological worldviews in ways that help the individual deepen one's connection to God,

and thereby the world and others. Buber shows how any connection is a holy experience, requiring dignity and deep listening to others. Rosenzweig shows the significance of communal influence on one's worldview and how to see commandments as loving as opposed to dogmatic. Heschel provides a real sense of autonomy in the Jewish legal process by seeing the mechanism of interpretation as a necessary part of the God-given *halakhah*. All three are concerned with seeing revelation as a kind of relationship between God and the Israelite people. They all articulate important lessons through a theological lens by attempting to put into words the paradoxical and shocking event that is revelation.

Understanding how each thinker approaches revelation offers insight not only into how they perceive Jewish revelation, but also exhibits how they each gain knowledge through what they prioritize. This can range from presence, to wonder, or even experience itself. They are reminders of the greater values behind existing frameworks. Oftentimes in religious frameworks, worshippers do not ask themselves: Why am I doing what I am doing? What binds me to this calling? Instead, worshippers often get lost in the praxis. By engaging with the significance of revelation in everyday Jewish life, these philosophers remind the worshipper to take a step back from one's usual practice and ask about the relevance of the entire structure within which one operates in one's religious life. This analysis of the thought of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel has aimed to illuminate different frameworks that can help guide thinking about larger questions about the integrity of religious systems or systems of meaning-making that one is a part of.

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