

REVELATION: CRITICISM AND FAITH¹

By Rabbi Gershom Barnard

I would like to begin speaking about Revelation with a paraphrase of the philosopher Immanuel Kant: Criticism (critical thought) without faith is empty. Faith without criticism is blind. I hope to present a view of revelation which is both critical and faithful. I do not by any means claim that my view corresponds to any official statement of the Conservative movement, but I can confidently say that my views are well within the Conservative spectrum.

While critical thought is sometimes seen as the enemy of religious faith, for me, critical thought is the necessary foundation of religious faith. Critical thinking corresponds to the religious imperative of iconoclasm, breaking idols. Maimonides² defined idolatry as worshipping any created being. Now, the problem of idolatry is not bowing down to statues. Idolatry consists in taking anything that has relative or contingent value and treating it as if it had absolute value. I apply that principle, not only to things, but also to ideas and beliefs. I believe that, in order for us to be free of the taint of idolatry, we must be ruthless in our criticism. No belief or statement is beyond criticism. Even the Torah must be subject to criticism. A saying attributed to Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk expresses this point very well: Why did Moses break the tablets of the law when he came down from Mt. Sinai and saw the people worshipping the golden calf? Not because he lost his temper, but because he realized that, if people would make an idol of something as foolish as a golden calf, they would certainly make an idol of the Torah, which is of great value.

Rabbi J.H. Hertz, in his well-known commentary on the *Humash*, wrote that “Judaism stands or falls with its belief in the historical actuality of the Revelation at Sinai”³. I would place myself in direct opposition to Rabbi Hertz on this point. First, Biblical scholarship has undermined beyond repair the belief that the Pentateuch as we have it came into being in one fell swoop in the second millennium BCE. I am not a specialist in Biblical criticism, but I quote from the essay “Modern Methods of Biblical Study,” by Rabbi Benjamin E. Scolnic, which appears at the back of the Conservative *Humash Etz Hayim*: “Most scholars believe that the Torah was compiled and edited by Priestly redactors in Babylonia between 600 and 400 BCE.”⁴

Furthermore, the Biblical text cannot be regarded as a reliable source for the history of Canaan and nearby areas during the period of which it purports to treat. I say that, in

¹ This essay is adapted from a talk given at a community education program presented by the Greater Cincinnati Board of Rabbis on May 16, 2006. The various citations from traditional literature, highly selective as they are, should not be regarded as “proof texts,” but as illustrations of ways in which my view is connected with traditional Jewish beliefs.

² *Hil. AZ 2:1*

³ *Commentary on the Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 402

⁴ *Humash Etz Hayim*, p. 1501.

part, because of the probable dating of the text. How can a source from the 6th century BCE be considered reliable concerning what it says about the 16th century BCE? The most radical current views of the history of the Biblical period, those of the so-called “minimalists,” are, to simplify things considerably, that all Biblical stories were made up around the 6th century BCE. They reflect concerns of that time, and, only by chance, the reality of hundreds of years earlier. I don’t necessarily agree with those extreme views, but my religious faith would not be affected at all if they were true. I agree with Franz Rosenzweig, who wrote, “Where we differ from orthodoxy is in our reluctance to draw from our belief in the holiness or uniqueness of the Torah, and in its character of revelation, any conclusions as to its literary genesis and the philological value of the text as it has come down to us. If all of Wellhausen’s theories were correct and the Samaritans really had the better text, our faith would not be shaken in the least.”⁵

I would add, however, that, even if we had texts which were contemporaneous to the supposed Revelation at Sinai, they could not be taken as evidence of the historical actuality of that Revelation. Texts are texts, ink on parchment. They are part of the natural world, and they cannot jump out of it. The most that we could say, if we had a text that actually dated back to the 13th century BCE (or whenever) is that the people who wrote it believed that God had appeared to them.

So much for criticism. I believe that it is a necessary part of our religious life, but it leaves us nowhere. I believe that the logical conclusion of a purely rational, critical, approach to religious matters is complete agnosticism.

Into the empty space left by thoroughgoing critical thought, steps faith. My concept of faith is that it is an orientation of the entire self to life and to the world, which guides us in our lives in the world, and which fills in areas which critical thought leaves blank, not because it has no answer at the moment for a given question, but because it cannot even address the question. Critical, or mature, faith doesn’t deal at all with matters that critical thought might address. For example, it is not a matter of faith that the Battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815; that is a matter of fact. It is not a matter of faith that the Battle of Waterloo was fought in 1802; that is a factual error. It is not a matter of faith that the Reds will win the World Series in 2006. At the moment, we don’t know whether or not that will be true, but at some point in a few months, we shall be able to say either that it is a matter of fact or an error of fact. By the same token, the dating and history of composition of the Pentateuch is not a matter of faith. It is a question of fact, about which the preponderance of evidence available today contradicts the conventional or traditional belief.

I have referred to faith as an orientation of the whole self. It is more than belief, it is more than action, it is more than feeling, but it includes all of those. If faith cannot deal with matters of fact, or with things which might be matters of fact, it does deal with the human

⁵ Letter to Jacob Rosenheim, 1927, cited in Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, p. 158. Julius Wellhausen was the leading proponent of German Biblical criticism in the 19th century. He held that the Pentateuch was composed of sources J, E, D, and P, compiled by a redactor. Wellhausen also held that the Samaritan Pentateuch is more authentic than the Masoretic Text.

meaning of such matters. We should not claim to have faith that the Pentateuch came into being in any particular way at any particular time, but we can have faith that the Torah came to us from God, and that is my faith, to be expressed both in words and, especially, in action.

I believe that God makes Himself present to people. Among the times and places, the human experiences, in which His Presence has been especially intense are those which gave rise to the *Torah shebikh'tav* (Written Teaching) and the classical sources of the *Torah sheb'al peh* (Oral Teaching). In seeing God's presence as having been especially intense in those experiences, while maintaining my critical stance, I take a hint from a passage in the Talmud (*Sukkah 5a*):

Rabbi Jose stated, "The *Shekhina* never descended to earth, nor did Moses and Elijah ascend to Heaven, as it is written, 'The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth as He given to humanity' "

In response to objections quoting Biblical verses which seemed to show that the *Shekhina* did descend and that Moses and Elijah did ascend, Rabbi Jose answered that they got close but didn't leave their respective domains.

The practical significance of my statement, that God's presence has been especially intense at those times and places, is that the *Torah shebikh'tav* and the *Torah sheb'al peh* as they have come down to us are the most authoritative sources for knowing and carrying out God's will. Really, the most important source is the *Torah sheb'al peh*, because it includes the authoritative Jewish interpretation of the *Torah shebikh'tav*.⁶ In principle, the *Torah sheb'al peh* is open-ended and never-ending; the stream of Torah interpretation goes on forever. However, if we look at the historical reality of the *Torah sheb'al peh*, we see that it is not all of one piece. It had a classical period, in which the basic parameters of the Jewish religious tradition were set, and a period in which interpretation became more prominent than innovation. I believe that, in order to heed most carefully the voice of God that speaks to us through our tradition, we must give special weight to the message that was conveyed in the classical period of the *Torah sheb'al peh*. That period lasted until about 600 CE, and it gave us the *Mishnah*, the *Tosefta*, the *halakhic Midrashim*, and the *Talmud Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*.⁷

The ongoing stream of interpretation is entrusted primarily to those who have devoted themselves to its study and interpretation, that is, to rabbis. We read at Deuteronomy 17:11, "You shall act according to the instructions given to you and the rulings handed down to you. Do not stray from what they tell you, to the right or to the left." In the Talmud (*Berakhot 19b et passim*), this command is understood to mean that it is a *mitzvah* to follow the teachings of the rabbis. In another source, *Yerushalmi Berakhot 1:4*, the authority of the rabbis is compared with that of prophets, to the

⁶ Cf. *Pesikta Rabbati 5*: God said to the nations, "Why do you claim to be my children? Only those who have my secret are my children." The nations ask, "What is Your secret?" God replied, "It is the *Mishnah*"

⁷ These are the works included in the *Torah sheb'al peh* by Maimonides in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*

advantage of the rabbis.

However, rabbinical teachings need a reality check. We find such a check, for example, at *Berakhot 44a-45a*. Different rabbis were disputing about a point of law, and the dispute was resolved, not by technical argument, but by saying “*Puk hazei ma ama dabar*” (Go see what people actually do.) Now, the meaning of Revelation cannot be established by public opinion polls or surveys, but neither can it be established by abstract reasoning divorced from the real lives of people.

The Jewish people is an essential element in the understanding of Revelation because, when God made Himself present at Sinai (using that term as a metaphor for whatever times and places gave rise to the *Torah shebikhtav* and the *Torah sheb'al peh*), He made Himself present to the entire people as a group. The *Mekhilta*⁸ explains the use of singular grammatical forms to refer to the Jewish people encamped at Mt. Sinai as indicating that, at that time, when God appeared to them, they were united as one, as *Knesset Yisrael*. Each person has his or her own relationship with God, but our ability to apprehend God as He appeared at Sinai is mediated through our participation in *Knesset Yisrael*. Solomon Schechter used the term “Catholic Israel,” meaning the mass of loyal Jews, to refer to the historical continuity of *Knesset Yisrael*, and it is therefore the actual practice of Catholic Israel which is the reality check of rabbinic interpretations.

I agree with Franz Rosenzweig that “all that God ever reveals in revelation is – revelation. Or, to express it differently, He reveals nothing but Himself to man”⁹. All the texts, sources, and teachings which we have, which have been regarded as the products of Divine Revelation, are people’s responses to God’s Self-revelation. I believe that the best, truest, most faithful, response to that Revelation is to live in accordance with the Torah as interpreted through the long-term consensus of those rabbis whose authority is accepted by the majority of the Jewish people.

⁸ *Debahodesh Yitro 1*

⁹ *A Note on a Poem by Judah ha-Levi*, cited in Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, p. 285.