

*Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition.* By Benjamin D. Sommer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 419. \$50.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-0300158731.

In his bold new monograph, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*, Benjamin Sommer attempts to demonstrate that analysis of the Bible as a historical document can be helpful and even enriching for Jewish theology, and that conversely, articulations of Jewish theology can be useful lenses through which both Jewish and non-Jewish biblical scholars might read the Hebrew Bible. His articulation of a new Jewish theology that embraces a source-critical approach to the Hebrew Bible is compelling and, I believe, can serve as a much-needed new manifesto for the contemporary Jew. It is less clear, however, whether Sommer's readings of the Hebrew Bible in light of later Jewish thinkers will be convincing to scholars of ancient Israelite religion.

Sommer begins with an introduction and a first chapter that lay out the stakes and prior assumptions of his project. In the introduction, Sommer explains the two major aims of his book. First, the author intends to show that the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—expresses what he refers to as a “participatory theory of revelation,” that is, the idea that “the Pentateuch not only conveys God’s will but also reflects Jewish interpretation of and response to that will” (2). He contrasts this theory with the “stenographic theory of revelation,” according to which the Pentateuch is a product of God’s explicit dictation to Moses, who faithfully wrote down every word that God conveyed. Secondly, Sommer claims that by demonstrating this depiction of revelation as one (though not the only) model presented within the Pentateuch, he will also reveal the “authenticity” of the theology of later thinkers, primarily Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Joshua Heschel, “within Jewish tradition” (6). The first chapter lays forth the tension that his book attempts to bridge, between engagement with the Hebrew Bible as a religious Jew on the one hand and as a critical scholar on the other, through the use of two categories, “artifact” and “scripture.” Sommer claims that these two categories need not be mutually exclusive, and further argues for a recovery of theological concerns—in addition to, for example, historical or literary motivations—in biblical scholarship.

Sommer frames this project as a response to what he describes as an anti-Jewish or antireligious approach to the Hebrew Bible, one which insists that “it is illegitimate to use rabbinic lenses to look at the Bible” and that “the Bible is not really a Jewish book at all” (21). It is certainly the case that some early Bible scholars held views that were inarguably anti-Jewish. For example, the late nineteenth century German scholar Julius Wellhausen presented the “legalistic” portions of ancient Israelite religion—whose ultimate embodiment was rabbinic Judaism—as an unfortunate degeneration of an earlier, spontaneous form of religion, a development which only Christianity was able to reverse.<sup>1</sup> Yet just because one rejects the anti-Judaism of Wellhausen does not mean that it is necessary to claim the Bible as itself a “Jewish” book. To describe the ancient Israelites as the “first Jews,” as Sommer does on page 24, or Deuteronomy as “the oldest Jewish commentary” (64), is to make an overly ambitious claim for continuity between modern synagogue-goers and

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<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. Allan Menzies and J. Sutherland Black (New York: Meridian, 1957).

a group of henotheistic animal sacrificers, not to mention assuming the existence of a category we might reasonably call “Judaism” in the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup>

In the second chapter, Sommer analyzes the different biblical sources that describe the moment of God’s revelation to the Israelites in order to show that the Hebrew Bible itself contains multiple different attitudes towards revelation and authority, some of which either reflect or gesture towards a participatory theology. Sommer’s description of these sources follows a version of the Documentary Hypothesis, according to which the Pentateuch is made up of four primary sources, usually referred to as J, E, P, and D, that have been woven together. The Pentateuch contains elements of a revelation narrative from each of the four sources, and Sommer describes the important elements of each. He focuses primarily on the narrative contained in the E source, which he sees as the least clear of the four: the source’s depiction of revelation is riddled with gaps and contradictions, and scholarly opinions differ widely as to how this source ought to be reconstructed.

Sommer shows that the textual incoherence of the source creates ambiguity about the source’s view of revelation. For example, because of discontinuities in the text, scholars have disagreed as to whether the Decalogue was originally a part of the E source, and if so, whether it was originally presented at a different point in the revelation narrative. An E source without a Decalogue, or one that presents it as more clearly mediated by Moses, according to Sommer, “leans more heavily in the direction of the participatory” (49). However, Sommer does not take a firm position as to the originality or location of the Decalogue in E, but argues that the ambiguity about revelation inherent in the source’s textual difficulties is itself theologically significant. Sommer writes, “By presenting a jumbled set of memories as to what happened at the lawgiving, how it happened, why and when and where it happened, the final version of the Pentateuch forces us to wonder about revelation and to contemplate its nature” (74). According to Sommer, E’s internal ambiguity opens the door to a view of revelation as a potentially nonverbal, even contentless event that is open to, and even calls for, human interpretation.

This is a compelling theological reading, but it is one that Sommer himself ought to take more credit for instead of ascribing intentionality to the biblical author(s). Sommer may well be right about E’s lack of clarity, but this analysis does not justify his claim that “Exodus does not want the audience to know whether the lawgiving was direct, mediated, or a mix of the two” (41). What the E author does or does not “want” is both unknowable and irrelevant to Sommer’s ability to convincingly interpret the text as a portrayal of a revelation that is mysterious, indirect, and highly mediated.

Having thus argued for a participatory view of revelation within the Hebrew Bible, Sommer spends the next four chapters explaining the theological implications of this theory. The third chapter deals with the implications of this theology for the significance of law and obligation. If one is to ascribe to a view of revelation in which the law was in large part produced by a community in response to a non-verbal self-disclosure by God, what—if anything—makes the law thus produced binding on future generations? First, Sommer argues for a conception of Moses, or more accurately

2 There is currently a live scholarly debate as to whether or not the category of “religion” existed at all in late antiquity (several hundred years, of course, after the composition of the latest works of the Pentateuch). See, for example, Daniel Boyarin and Carlin Barton’s *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). On the appropriate use of the word *Jew* to describe late ancient people, see Timothy Michael Law and Charles Halton, eds., “Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts,” special issue, *Marginalia Review of Books* (August 26, 2014), <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>. Sommer himself also expertly addresses some of the important theological differences between early biblical audiences and post-biblical Jews in his previous book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

later writers who write under Moses' name, as a kind of prophetic "translator" who gives linguistic form to a nonlinguistic communication from God. Sommer then goes on to show that the notion of a difference between divine law and earthly law is present in later Jewish thought, and concludes by arguing that both the Pentateuch and later sources agree on an approach in which the notion of some kind of obligating divine law is central, but the details of that law are unclear and must be constantly and actively worked out by those who see themselves as obligated.

Sommer's final three chapters, which put forth a fairly radical Jewish textual theology, are perhaps the strongest section of the book. In his fourth chapter, Sommer argues that according to a participatory theory of theology, there is no longer a distinction between what he refers to (using traditional, millennia-old rabbinic categories) as the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. This is a fascinating argument that uses the post-Talmudic Jewish commitment to authoritative humanly authored law to explain how a humanly authored Torah can be just as religiously significant as a divinely authored one. According to categories presented in early rabbinic literature, the Jewish textual canon consists of a "Written Torah," which is more or less equivalent to the Hebrew Bible, and an "Oral Torah," which consists of explanations of, elaborations on, and innovations beyond the biblical canon that would come to be recorded in works of rabbinic literature such as the Mishnah and Talmud. Sommer notes that the primary difference between these two canons was their acknowledged authorship: whereas the Written Torah was usually portrayed as directly authored by God through Moses, the Oral Torah was widely acknowledged to be produced with a much greater amount of human agency. When this difference in authorship disappears as a result of a participatory theory of theology, Sommer argues, the primary distinction itself is also erased. Yet because Judaism since the rabbinic period has viewed the Oral Torah as a binding source of law, this change in status does not need to have a diminishing effect on the authority of the Hebrew Bible. Sommer delightfully characterizes the nature of the Oral Torah as "the Gilgamesh or Akhilleus of religious literature, part human and part divine" (151), and he suggests that the Hebrew Bible can continue to claim an authoritative status as part of that textual tradition.

The fifth chapter argues for a theology of revelation as an ongoing as opposed to a onetime event. In so doing, Sommer claims that the Hebrew Bible itself, particularly the D source, already contains its own indications that it is meant to be revised and adapted over time, and thus subtly presents itself as "Oral Torah." He also shows how this notion of ongoing revelation manifests in the writings of Heschel and Rosenzweig. Finally, in the sixth chapter Sommer articulates a theory of Jewish tradition—in which category he includes the Hebrew Bible—as an ongoing dialogue. He ends by presenting a model of the Bible's canonicity not as a source of dogma, which he claims it inherently cannot be since it contains multiple conflicting viewpoints, but rather as a source of guidance and the starting point for a discussion.

Sommer mentions early in the book that it is the presence of morally troubling passages in the Pentateuch, and not the existence of self-contradictory passages, that "precludes [him] from believing in the traditional Jewish and Christian view of the Bible's revelatory origin" (28). The attitude towards the Bible he describes in this book is a compelling religious response not only to the possible challenges presented by academic biblical criticism, but to the horror that many modern readers of the Bible feel towards, for example, the sanction of slavery, the prohibition of homosexuality, and the commandment to kill Amalekite babies. Sommer's theology does not require him to explain away or apologize for these texts as divine commandments, but rather allows him to acknowledge them as human mistakes, while still treating the Bible as a whole as an important source of tradition—even as the most important human response to some kind of experience of God's presence. This is a refreshing, intellectually, and morally honest approach towards the role the Hebrew Bible might

play for a religious Jew, or indeed for any religious person who grapples with how to treat the Bible both as scripture and as flawed.

However, Sommer's excellent theological arguments in the second half of the book are unfortunately undermined by his insistence on demonstrating that his view is not radical at all, but has already been given voice both in the Pentateuch and in later Jewish thought. Though, as he demonstrates, some parts of his views clearly do have some precedent in these earlier works, at times it seems that Sommer bends over backwards to prove that his points have already been made hundreds or thousands of years earlier. In particular, his insistence on the coherence of the Jewish canon, and his own position as part of it, seems to lead him to use somewhat anachronistic descriptions of the Hebrew Bible. For example, Sommer argues that Deuteronomy presents itself as a kind of "Oral Torah" because much of it is related in the form of a speech (164). It is certainly true some rabbinic modes of legal interpretation are reminiscent of elements of Deuteronomy—in particular, its revision of the earlier canonical laws set forth in E. Yet Sommer's particular characterization implies that the author of Deuteronomy subscribed to a set of categories that do not appear in Jewish texts until hundreds of years later (not to mention suggesting that a defining feature of "Oral Torah" is its literal orality, which is something of a distortion of the historical significance of this category, as Sommer himself points out on p. 149!). In this and other analyses, Sommer thus seems to be treating the categories of "Written Torah" and "Oral Torah" as though they have an ontological reality independent of the rabbinic, medieval, and contemporary writers who created and deployed them.

Sommer criticizes the tradition of Protestant biblical theology for its insistence that non-Protestant readings of the Bible are inherently incorrect. Yet in his own insistence on a unified canon of Jewish thought, Sommer himself is in danger of falling into the same trap by claiming that the Hebrew Bible on its own must be read as inevitably leading to a specific, and specifically rabbinic, theology. However, Sommer's compelling theological arguments can—and should—be detached from an insistence on their prefiguration, so to speak, in earlier Jewish sources and the Pentateuch. Sommer's theology seems to draw inspiration from, but ultimately to go beyond, the E source, Maimonides, Heschel, and Rosenzweig, in its articulation of a Jewish doctrine that responds to a specifically contemporary set of both scholarly and moral challenges. Rather than insist on his theology's "authenticity," he might be better served by emphasizing the way in which his new and refreshing articulations of the Bible's role in Jewish religious life may suit the needs of today's Jewish readers better than others' ideas have done before.

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