**Torah from Sinai and Biblical Criticism as Two Stages of Torah Study**

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Most people believe that there is a conflict between the traditional concept of Torah from Sinai and biblical criticism However, this contradiction resolves itself the minute we perceive the two as complementary stages in Torah study whose religious aim is providing a suitable, religious interpretation of the phenomenon of revelation.

Even from a fundamentalist perspective, which conceives of the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai as a one-time, actual, historical event, the intent is not to sanctify the historicity of the narrative, in and of itself, but rather the revelatory aspect embodied within it. Thus, the mythic narrative concerning the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, like many other stories in the Bible, illustrates the principle of revelation in a way that speaks to all ages. This leads me to conclude that in so far as childhood education is concerned, the children should be taught the story as is, without introducing issues that concern biblical critics. However, this is only the first stage in formulating a sober religious approach regarding the concept of revelation and its meaning. The importance of this first stage derives from the fact that it provides the children with a positive predisposition towards the notion of revelation—a predisposition which will serve them well during their religious quest in the second stage, when they mature.

In contrast, the critical approach to biblical texts demands that a mature and in-depth philosophical and theological discussion take place before the text is even read. For one of the questions that may very well be raised during the theological discussion is the following fundamental one: What is the phenomenon of revelation and is it real? The answer to this question requires the students to consider another series of questions regarding the boundaries of human consciousness and experience, and regarding what humanity thinks about the existence of a reality beyond the physical reality known to us. Furthermore, they will have to consider the way in which peoples’ differing social, cultural, and historical experiences shape their interpretation about what there is or, alternatively, what there is not, beyond the bounds of reality as we know it.

These profound theological questions have enormous educational and cultural weight since they are necessary to formulating an understanding of the source of our values. However, just as a naïve approach to the biblical text is unable to provide the basis for conducting a mature discussion of these matters on its own neither is the critical one. This notwithstanding, the critical approach is also a necessary condition for conducting a mature, in-depth theological-philosophical discussion, for it reveals the breadth of the existential, literary, and cultural richness found in the Bible—found in the multiplicity of context-dependent language and plots instantiating the phenomenon referred to in the Bible as the encounter between humanity and God.

The contribution of historical-critical research to the theological discussion about the concept of revelation stems from the fact that it presents the Holy Scriptures as an empirical platform containing a wide range of approaches, languages, and ways that God’s relationship to the world and humanity has been considered within its concrete cultural and existential contexts. Therefore in keeping with my approach, it is necessary for the critical approach to exist in tandem with the religious predisposition to revelation engendered by the naïve approach. Only by having both, can we continue the serious conversation about the nature of faith and the nature of the relationship between the finite and infinite, without preemptively rejecting the possibility that what is beyond the boundaries of human consciousness and experience is meaningful to human life.

Briefly put, the naïve approach to faith as it relates to Torah from Sinai is important because it formulates a religious language in which the concept of revelation and the other theological and philosophical issues related to it are accorded a place of honor. However, these issues cannot be clarified self-referentially. Such clarification is only possible when the originary, naïve religious approach, is integrated with painstaking, analytical research that reveals the meaning of the Bible’s rich religious, cultural, and historical context-dependent expressions.

Practically speaking, is it possible to assent to both approaches at once? My aforementioned answer is a resounding yes, and I believe the great, German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rozensweig, showed us the way to get there, when he wrote:

For us too it [the Bible] is the work of a single mind. We do not know who this mind was; we cannot believe that it was Moses. We name that mind among ourselves by the abbreviation with which the Higher Criticism of the Bible indicates its presumed final redactor of the text: R. We, however, take this R to stand not for redactor but for *rabbenu* [“Our Rabbi”]. For whoever he was, and whatever text lay before him, he is our teacher, and his theology is our teaching [[1]](#footnote-1)

1. M. Buber and F. Rozensweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. by Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994), 23.From the original German: Franz Rosenzweig, “Die Einheit der Bibel,” in Martin Buber und Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)