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From Sinai to This Day: Hermann Cohen's and Franz Rosenzweig's Recasting of the Giving of the Torah

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In jewish tradition, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai has long been centered as Judaism's defining divine revelation. As the modern age emerged, developed, and fermented, it became increasingly difficult to accept the giving of the Torah at Sinai as historical fact. Many of its traditional interpretations were reassessed; many of its implications were cast into doubt. In the early twentieth century, Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) attempted to reconcile the advent of modern philosophy with the bequeathal of this bedrock Jewish tradition. From their viewpoint, the Hebrew Bible's account of the revelation on Sinai in Ex 19–20 (hereafter: Sinaitic revelation) raised epistemological difficulties and was fraught with questionable ontological assertions. Yet, since Cohen and Rosenzweig chose to make the Sinai revelation central to their thought, its philosophical challenges had to be addressed.

Cohen and Rosenzweig lived in a challenging intellectual climate. A change of faith at the baptismal font constantly loomed (and in Rosenzweig's case nearly occurred); a growing rift between science and faith threatened to deplete the pews of synagogues and churches alike. Within the Jewish fold, options abounded for those wishing to blaze new trails in religious thought and praxis: Reform Judaism, spiritual Zionism, Haskalah and post-Haskalah modernism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholasticism, to name but a few. Yet, it was difficult even among these modernizing options to find a path that embraced Jewish tradition, taking seriously its biblical and rabbinical literary canons without pledging allegiance to Orthodoxy. Despite their status as authoritative interpreters

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of German Idealism,[1] two thinkers[2] approached the philosophy of religion with the premise that the tradition of Jewish theological discourse must be axiomatic: Cohen and Rosenzweig.

An alumnus (though not a graduate) of the Rabbinic Seminary at Breslau (1857–1861), Hermann Yehezkel Cohen imbibed a unique mixture of admiration for the intellectual heritage of traditional Judaism and reverence for modern *Wissenschaft*. The training he received in traditional exegesis precluded unconditional acceptance of dogmas, while encouraging careful reevaluation of truisms. His decision to abandon the seven-year program to pursue an academic career landed him a position as *professor ordinarius* of philosophy at the University of Marburg (1875), the first unconverted Jew to earn the title at a German university.[3] Cohen published throughout his career on all matters Jewish. In his public clash with historian Heinrich von Treitschke, he established himself as an original,

1. As Paul Natorp noted in his eulogy for his mentor, "It is no wonder that after devoting decades of labored efforts to a commentary on Kant's work, suddenly Cohen emerged as the founder of a [philosophical] system in which, deriving from Kant, he posited radically subversive questions [*einschneidenden Fragen*] undermining [Kant's] thought." Paul Natorp, "Nachruf an Hermann Cohen: Gesprochen bei der Trauerfeier auf dem israelitischen Friedhof," *Neue jüdische Monatshefte* 15 (1917–18): 354.

As a promising young scholar of German Idealism, Rosenzweig was offered a lectureship in Berlin by his doctoral supervisor, Friedrich Meinecke, but he refused it to devote himself instead to the newly founded Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt am Main. See letter dated August 30, 1920, to Meinecke, in *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften I: Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 2, *1918–1929*, ed. R. Rosenzweig and E. Rosenzweig-Scheinmann (The Hague, 1979; hereafter, *BT*), 678–82; Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York, 1972), 94–98.

2. I will not discuss here the intricacies of Cohen's influence on Rosenzweig. Their encounter in autumn 1913 upon Rosenzweig's attendance of the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin soon turned into a close personal and intellectual friendship. But as Benjamin Sax has shown, Ismar Elbogen's contribution to Rosenzweig's knowledge and use of Jewish sources appears to have been greater; see "Language and Jewish Renewal: Franz Rosenzweig's Hermeneutics of Citation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 197–243. For Cohen's influence on Rosenzweig, see Rivka Horwitz, "Hermann Cohen ve-Franz Rosenzweig," and "Hermann Cohen ve-Franz Rosenzweig: Shonut v-Dimion," in *Franz Rosenzweig: The Star and the Man; Collected Essays by Rivka Horwitz*, ed. A. Cohen (Be'er Sheva, 2010), 231–50 and 251–65; Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik, "Cohen und Rosenzweig: Zu Vernunft und Offenbarung," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62.2 (2006): 511–33; Myriam Bienenstock, *Cohen und Rosenzweig: Ihre Auseinandersetzung mit dem deutschen Idialismus* (Munich, 2018).

3. Frederick F. Beiser, *Hermann Cohen: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 2018), 92.

unapologetic voice.[4] According to Frederick Beiser, an essay Cohen penned ten years after the Treitschke affair titled "Der Messiasidee" ("The Messianic Idea") and published posthumously,[5] presents the Marburg philosopher's conception of Judaism in nuce: the faith is future-oriented (the Messiah is its highest ideal) but this-worldly (attainment of the highest good will take place within a concrete social-political reality); it is universalist (the messianic age will apply to all of humanity) and depends on human actions (and not supernatural intervention).

Michael Zank sets the notion of atonement at the very heart of Cohen's philosophical-religious project.[6] Like the messiah piece, Cohen's "Die Versöhnungsidee" (The idea of atonement) was written in the 1890s but published only after Cohen's death.[7] In Zank's view, in atonement Cohen found an idea that binds together morality, religious praxis, messianic hope, interhuman and human-God relationships, and universal redemption.[8] Although Zank's study focuses on Cohen's philosophy of religion, he frames his discussion with references to the philosopher's hermeneutical approach to Jewish Scriptures. In this discussion, Zank exposes a dialectic between attunement to tradition and epistemic caution: "One might say that, as a Jewish exegete, [Cohen] is less interested in an *Urtext*, *Ur*-meaning, or *Ur*-revelation than his Christian colleagues [. . .] The character of revelation demanded one to seek its meaning actively, by bringing one's own insights to the text so that its meanings were increased rather than reduced."[9] Moreover, Zank provides examples to help clarify Cohen's offhand citation of Jewish texts from memory, which resulted in inevitable inaccuracies.[10] Cohen's combination of a firm, yet undogmatic, commitment to the traditional readings of Jewish texts, with a blasé treatment of citations reminiscent of informal studious

4. Heinrich von Treitschke, "Unsere Aussichten," *Preußische Jahrbücher* 44 (1879): 559–76; von Treitschke, "Noch einige Bemerkungen zur Judenfrage," *Preußische Jahrbücher* 45 (1880): 85–89. Cohen's response appeared in the pamphlet *Ein Bekenntniß in der Judenfrage* (Berlin, 1880).

5. Hermann Cohen, "Der Messiasidee," in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften,* vol. 1, *Ethische und religiöse Grundfragen,* ed. B. Strauß (Berlin, 1924), 105–24. For a partial English translation see Cohen, "The Messianic Idea," in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. and ed. E. Jospe (Cincinnati Ohio, 1993), 122–30.

6. Michael Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence, R.I., 2020).

7. Cohen, "Die Versöhnungsidee," in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, 1:124–39.

8. Zank, *Atonement*, especially 134–51.

9. Zank, *Atonement*, 111.

10. Zank, *Atonement*, 143.

exchanges at the *bet midrash*, is helpful for gaining a sense of Cohen's basic orientation to matters of textual interpretation in the formulation of his philosophy of religion.

Daniel Weiss's evaluation of Cohen's treatment of Jewish sources recognizes Cohen's approach as "dialogically juxtaposing the nonidentical voices of philosophy and of Scripture."[11] Weiss describes references to Cohen's interpretive method as "rabbinic" or "midrashic,"[12] showing how the philosopher's talmudic training had cultivated a polyphonic mindset: if halakhic dicta can cohere with aggadic ruminations in rabbinic literature, Weiss indicates, so can rational arguments and exegetical interpolations in Cohen's work.[13] According to Weiss, Cohen refines the rabbinic openness to multiplicity to strike a delicate balance between source text and interpretation whereby neither takes precedence over its counterpart: "While rejecting the traditionalist or historicist tendency that assigns sole 'authority' to the texts, [Cohen] also distances himself from those who would construct a theology or a philosophy of religion without doing justice to 'the way the words run.'"[14] In contradistinction to Beiser and Zank, Weiss shifts the center of attention to *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judaismus* (*Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*),[15] as the locus for understanding Cohen's philosophy of religion. Indeed, unlike the aforementioned essays, the sheer structure and rationale of *RdV* deliver a summa of Cohen's conception of religion as embodied by the Jewish faith. As such, there is no bypassing the question of Sinai, since not only is revelation a key concept in religion but the giving of the Torah is the cornerstone of Jewish faith. In his reading of the relevant passages (*RdV* 32–33, 84–86), Weiss foregrounds Cohen's presentation of Oral Torah as an open-ended project. Its grounding in the phrase *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* (halakhah delivered to Moses from Sinai) does not cage Cohen in historical contingencies or the rigidity of written Torah, says Weiss; instead, the idea is used to facilitate religious renewal through interpretive freedom and emotional connection to the faith, inspired by Sinaitic revelation.[16]

11. Daniel Weiss, *Paradox and the Prophets: Hermann Cohen and the Indirect Communication of Religion* (Oxford, 2012), 83.

12. References in Weiss, *Paradox*, 83n100.

13. Weiss, *Paradox*, 79.

14. Weiss, *Paradox*, 68.

15. Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus dem Quellen des Judentums* (Wiesbaden, 1988); hereafter: *RdV*. For the English translation, see Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. S. Kaplan (Atlanta, 1995); hereafter: *RoR*. All translations from *RdV* are my own.

16. Weiss, *Paradox*, 80–81.

Franz Rosenzweig's trajectory in many ways stands opposed to that of Cohen's. A scion of an acculturated bourgeois Jewish family, he undertook training in medicine (1905–8) before switching to philosophy and history. His dissertation, "Hegel und der Staat" (Hegel and the state, 1912), was supervised by the leading German historian of the time, Friedrich Meinecke. But instead of preparing for an academic career, Rosenzweig became tormented by his own search for identity that culminated in a decision to convert to Christianity, at the behest of his close friend, Eugen Rosenstock. Two months later, in September 1913, Rosenzweig retracted his decision, and from then on dedicated his life to furthering and developing modern Jewish life. His first practical step was to attend the Lehranstalt des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies) in Berlin, where he met Hermann Cohen, and the two quickly became close colleagues and friends. After two semesters, in the autumn of 1914 Rosenzweig joined the German medical corps at the outbreak of World War I and later became an artillery officer on the Balkan front. While on active duty, the young Jewish intellectual drafted what was to be his only book-length discussion of Judaism, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*, 1921).[17] Decrying the futility of philosophers' attempts to formulate systems of thought reducible to a single principle, the *Star* delineates a system that juxtaposes three divine acts to three irreducible elements: God, humans, and world. The three divine acts are explicitly grounded in corresponding passages from the Bible: Genesis 1—creation; the Song of Solomon—revelation; and Psalm 115—redemption. The release of Rosenzweig's magnum opus also marked a transition to ventures other than participation in philosophical discourse. In 1922 he founded and directed the Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt (actualizing, to a degree, a vision he had shared with Cohen in a letter he sent from the front in 1917).[18] He also engaged in two groundbreaking translation

17. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* with an introduction by Reinhold Mayer and a memorial piece by Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), hereafter: *Stern*. There are two English translations: *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. Hallo (London, 1971; hereafter: *Star*); and *The Star of Redemption*, trans. B. E. Galli (Madison, Wisc., 2005). English citations refer to page numbers in Hallo's translation, but translations are my own.

18. Franz Rosenzweig, "Zeit ists [. . .] Gedanken über das jüdische Bildungsproblem des Augenblick," *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften III; Zweistromland; Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, ed. R. Mayer and A. Mayer (Dordrecht, 1984), 461–81. For an English translation, see Rosenzweig, "It Is Time: Concerning the Study of Judaism," in *On Jewish Learning*, trans. N. N. Glatzer (New York, 1965), 27–54.

projects: ninety-five poems of the medieval poet Judah Halevi[19] and, together with Martin Buber, a translation of the Hebrew Bible.[20]

This shift in the trajectory of Rosenzweig's career has caused a more pronounced division of his legacy than Cohen's between philosophical and theological interpretations of his work. In earlier work I have demonstrated, however, that the middle road between the two provides a more holistic understanding of Rosenzweig's thought. Delineating the intricate symbiosis between philosophical argumentation and the interpretation of Jewish religious texts, I show that Rosenzweig insists on constructing a philosophical system that frames the theological core of his thought: religious faith offers the only remedy to the ailments faced by humanity in modern times.[21] As Rosenzweig's thinking evolved, his work remained consistent thanks to what I call an "economy of ideas": numerous arguments, citations, and ideas appearing in his mature work may be traced back to early diary entries and letters. This reading of Rosenzweig unearths a productive tension in his work between philosophy and the Jewish exegetical tradition, which underscores the importance of Sinaitic revelation to his thought as a whole.[22]

Benjamin Sommer's attempt to formulate a traditional yet critically aware reception of Sinaitic revelation makes Rosenzweig (alongside Abraham Joshua Heschel) an indispensable resource. Sommer proposes a scheme informed by modern Bible scholarship, traditional sensibilities, and modern thought. Within it, Sinai becomes resistant to historicist critiques and remains a vital and inspiring cornerstone of Jewish theology. This scheme is based on the re-interpretation of the Sinai scene as a "participatory event," and it requires conceptualizing the Hebrew Bible as part of a

19. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften IV; Sprachdenken*, vol. 1, *Jehuda Halevi: Fünfundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte,* German and Hebrew with an afterword, ed. R. N. Rosenzweig (The Hague, 1983). For an English translation, see Barbara E. Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehudah Halevy: Translating, Translations, and Translators* (Montreal, 1995).

20. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift*, vol. 1, *Im Anfang*; vol. 2, *Namen*; vol. 3, *Er Rief*; vol. 4, *In der Wüste*; vol. 5, *Reden*; vol. 6, *Jehoschua*; vol. 7, *Richter*; vol. 8, *Schmuel*; vol. 9, *Könige*; vol. 10, *Jeschajahu* (Berlin, 1926–30). Buber completed the project of translating all twenty-four books of the Bible in 1961, republished as *Die Schrift: Aus dem Hebräischen verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig* (Stuttgart, 1992). This latter edition includes revisions and amendments of the work conducted with Rosenzweig.

21. Orr Scharf, *Thinking in Translation: Scripture and Redemption in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* (Berlin, 2019), 31–42.

22. Scharf, *Translation*, 157–59.

continuum of Jewish tradition rather than a discrete textual unit.[23] According to Sommer, Rosenzweig's insistence on the continuous presence of revelation throughout Jewish history offers a viable participatory interpretation of Sinai. The German Jewish thinker's solution, Sommer avers, is centered on the coupling of command and law as possessing an abiding presence in the life of believing Jews since the beginning of the faith. By pulling these two strands and weaving them into a single thread, as it were, Rosenzweig generates continuity between Sinai and the present.[24] In building his argument, Sommer refers to a passage from the *Star* that forms the very heart of Rosenzweig's formulation of revelation.[25] The subheadings of this extract from the *Star*—"Hearing," "The Commandment," "Present," "Revelation"—pithily encapsulate Sommer's recapitulation of Rosenzweig's argument: the Ten Commandments are reduced to the "I" that opens the First Commandment ("I am YAHWEH your God [. . .]"), contracting the revelatory scene of Ex 20 to a monosyllabic utterance. Yet, according to Rosenzweig, this act of contraction in fact stretches the presence of divine revelation throughout the whole of history, creating a uniform continuum of God-human encounters. Hence, in Rosenzweig's words, "The commandment is purely the present."[26] Here, Sommer points out, Rosenzweig fuses law (*Gesetz*) with commandment (*Gebot*): the divine utterances recorded in the Decalogue seamlessly coalesce with the religious dicta of believing Jews, which Rosenzweig makes even more clear by framing the relationship between deity and believers as an amorous dialogue: the commandment to love comes from on high, the law—whose fulfillment is cast as a loving act—is actualized down below, on earth.[27] And so, Sinai remains the backdrop of revelation, but in the form of an abstracted memory that continues to accompany the present.

Sommer's theological reading of Rosenzweig is illuminating, particularly with regard to his engagement with the Jewish exegetical tradition. He convincingly demonstrates that the German Jewish thinker collapsed the distinction between written Torah (the Hebrew Bible) and Oral Torah (rabbinic and postrabbinic teachings), thus aligning himself with traditional Jewish exegesis. Nevertheless, Sommer's focus on their interpretations of Scripture precludes Rosenzweig's indebtedness to the tradition of German Idealism. Thus, his reading fails to account for the commitments entailed

23. Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., 2015), 2, 8.

24. Sommer, *Revelation*, 118.

25. *Stern*, 196–98; *Star*, 176–78.

26. *Stern*, 197; *Star*, 177.

27. Sommer, *Revelation*, 118.

by Rosenzweig's and, by extension, Cohen's philosophical systems. Hence, this essay will suggest that the two thinkers' approaches to Sinaitic revelation demand we inhabit the elusive borderland between philosophy and biblical exegesis.

BETWEEN MAIMONIDES AND SPINOZA

Two philosophers who appear to most closely anticipate, and formulate, the Sinaitic dilemma that Rosenzweig and Cohen faced are Maimonides (1138–1204) and Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677). The former, an avowed Aristotelian philosopher as much as a devout promulgator of Jewish theology and law, saw in Sinaitic revelation a nearly insurmountable obstacle. Philosophically, Maimonides faced a set of problems. His famous metaphysical premise regarding God's incorporeality could hardly be defended in respect of an encounter between Moses and God on a mountain. Consequently, he was hard pressed to explain the physical transmission of God's word that Scripture explicitly describes. And scientifically, he faced the challenge of explaining how the laws of nature (defied by the sights and sounds experienced by the Israelites at Sinai) and the laws of humans (imparted in the Decalogue) are consistent with one another. Theologically, however, it was impossible for Maimonides to dismiss Sinaitic revelation altogether. His attempt to settle this dilemma appears in *The Guide of the Perplexed* where Maimonides concludes his interpretation of the revelatory scene by emphasizing the singularity of the event—its singularity served to explain its philosophical inscrutability:

> For it is impossible to expound the *Gathering at Mount Sinai* to a greater extent than they spoke about it, for it is one of the *mysteries of the Torah*. The true reality of that apprehension and its modality are quite hidden from us, for nothing like it happened before and will not happen after.[28]

The fact that no such event preceded or followed Sinai placed it beyond the pale of the cognition of the wisest rabbinic sages. Nevertheless, within the boundaries of human cognition, the only encounter between God and the people of Israel as a congregation is framed by Maimonides' elaborate theory of prophecy: Moses is first among the prophets. As the only one to have had a direct encounter with the Almighty, he was the only person to have heard the divine voice. He repeated the content of the divine utterances verbatim to the congregation gathered at the foot of the

28. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963), 366. Italics in the original.

mount.[29] Spinoza, for his part, sought to read Scripture impartially. He attempted to discern the literal meaning of the text, assuming that once discerned, it would provide a reliable account of the Bible's meaning. Therefore, in contrast to Maimonides, Spinoza's reading of Exodus 20 does not isolate it from other revelatory encounters in the Bible (the Old and the New Testaments). Rather, it is designed to determine the features that consistently recur in biblical depictions of God's encounters with humans, which Spinoza defines as prophetic.[30] This is not to say that Spinoza does not acknowledge the singularity of the Sinai event as the only time God's own voice spoke to the People of Israel: "But unless we wish to do violence to Scripture, we absolutely must grant that the Israelites heard a true voice."[31] Yet, the appearance of a second and different version of the Decalogue (Deut 6.6–18) leads Spinoza to conclude that "since God spoke only once, it seems to follow from this [variation] that the Decalogue does not intend to teach God's very words, but only their meaning."[32] This latter statement leads to inconclusive results: the Israelites' utter ignorance of the nature of God's presence (corporeal/incorporeal, the possibility of having a faithful visual representation)[33] was enough to make them wonder at God and to motivate them to obedience. That was the purpose of that manifestation. God did not want to teach the Israelites the absolute attributes of his essence—he did not reveal any of them at that time—he wanted, rather, to break their stubborn heart and win them over to obedience. So he addressed them not with arguments but with the sound of trumpets, with thunder, and with lightning.[34]

Uncharacteristically, then, Spinoza does not cut through the ambiguity of the Sinai event. Instead, he understands its mystery to be a device at the hand of God for subordinating the reckless Israelites into faith and the pyrotechnics employed at the scene as an additional veil around his true essence, not a manifestation thereof. Spinoza's ultimate conclusion from this scene is the following:

29. Maimonides, *Guide* 2.33; compare his seventh article of faith (out of thirteen) in his commentary on mSan 10, known as *Perek Helek*. Maimonides, *Hakdamot le-perush 'al ha-mishnah*, trans. Y. Elharizi, ed. M. D. Rabinowicz (Jerusalem, 1961), 140–44.

30. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel, ed. J. Israel (Cambridge, 2007), 79.

31. Spinoza, *Treatise*, 80.

32. Spinoza, *Treatise*, 80.

33. Spinoza, *Treatise*, 81–82.

34. Spinoza, *Treatise*, 270.

> There are no dealings, or no relationship, between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy [. . .] For the goal of Philosophy is nothing but truth. But the goal of Faith, as we've shown abundantly, is nothing but obedience and piety. Furthermore, the foundations of Philosophy are common notions, and [its truth] must be sought only from nature. But the foundations of Faith are histories and language, and [those foundations] must be sought only from Scripture and revelation.[35]

The question of obedience preoccupied both Maimonides and Spinoza in the context of Sinaitic revelation. In their studies of this question, Paul Franks[36] and Randi Rashkover[37] have associated this long-recognized impasse with Rosenzweig, and by extension with Cohen as well.[38] For the purposes of the current discussion, I bracket the question of law. Instead, I will take the premises they implicitly share in relation to the medieval and early modern philosophers' readings of the Sinai scene: (1) both Maimonides and Spinoza strive to interpret Ex 19–20 in philosophical terms; (2) Maimonides' primary commitment is to Jewish tradition, whereas Spinoza's primary commitment is to reason; and (3) Rosenzweig (and by implication, Cohen as well) sought to reconcile this tension between philosophical and traditional commitments by offering their own philosophical interpretations of the revelation at Sinai.

Absent from Franks's and Rashkover's discussions is the possibility of a philosophical interpretation that not only attempts to rescue Jewish tradition from caving under the pressure of rational analysis, but that Rosenzweig's and Cohen's own approaches to Sinaitic revelation were inspired by the tradition of midrashic interpretation. I therefore argue that the strategy that both thinkers chose was shift of emphasis: to avoid the problematics of Ex 19–20, Cohen and Rosenzweig chose alternative biblical prooftexts for the principal description of divine revelation. They reserved these discussions for their greatest works: In *RdV* Cohen posited the Deuteronomistic version of God's covenant with the people of Israel as the rational foundation of Jewish faith and the divine source of reason. In the *Star*, Rosenzweig interpreted Song of Solomon as disclosing the essence

35. Spinoza, *Treatise*, 271.

36. Paul Franks, "Sinai since Spinoza: Reflections on Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought," in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. L. T. Stuckenbrock, H. Najman, and G. J. Brooke (Boston, 2008), 333–54.

37. Randi Rashkover, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy*, vol. 2: *The Modern Era*, ed. M. Kavka, Z. Braiterman, and D. Novak (Cambridge, 2012), 399–426.

38. See Rashkover, "Revelation," 399.

of revelation as an amorous dialogue between God and humans. Through their use of alternative prooftexts to premise a philosophical definition of revelation, Cohen and Rosenzweig proposed byways to the epistemic impasses they identified in Sinai.

The terminology and presentation of their conceptions of revelation has attracted philosophical interpretations for the most part. Such readings propose that *RdV* and the *Star* are attempts to place biblical prooftexts in a systematic matrix through the philosophical formulation of theological concepts. But unlike other theological concepts, in Judaism revelation is not only an idea; it is first and foremost an event. The giving of the Torah is the ultimate human encounter with God, among other reasons, because it was experienced both by a man of God (Moses) and by the entire congregation (the people of Israel). As a result of its embeddedness in time and space, no abstractions will do the trick. The Bible's reception history plants Sinaitic revelation firmly at its heart. In light of this, philosophical interpretation becomes limited in the sense that it cannot avoid or undermine the tradition in question. This latter point is difficult to process in relation to Cohen and Rosenzweig; both define their projects as philosophical and go to great lengths to show that Jewish theology may be construed in terms of a philosophical system. And yet neither is willing to let the commitment to the philosophical system undermine the wholeness of Jewish tradition.

HERMANN COHEN: DEUTERONOMY AS THE COGNITION OF PURE JUDAISM

Speaking in 1910 Berlin before an audience of mostly Protestant theologians and philosophers, Hermann Cohen explicated *The Meaning of Judaism for the Religious Progress of Humanity*.[39] The philosophical jargon and schematic presentation of the paper were supported by an infrastructure of handpicked citations from and allusions to the Bible. The essence of Judaism that the Marburg professor distilled for his audience consisted of "God's love and justice" as "the paradigm of human morality."[40] The "spiritual exaltation" (*Begeisterung*) of the Jew praying "Hear O Israel" is not a mere exclamation of devotion but an expression of the religious consciousness of the faith, which is anchored in the fundamental idea (*Grundbegriff*)

39. Cohen, *Die Bedeutung des Judentums für den religiösen Fortschritt der Menschheit: Sondernausgabe aus dem Protokoll des 5. Weltkongresses für Freies Christentum und Religiösen Fortschritt* (Berlin, 1910); reprinted in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, 1:18–35. Citations are from the *Jüdische Schriften*.

40. Cohen, *Die Bedeutung*, 21.

of God's unity and singularity, manifested by love and law.[41] And so, the commandment to love God never appears in the Bible on its own; it always generates compliance with divine law: the verse "know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart" (Deut 4.39), says Cohen, states that "the love for God is the love for Morality."[42] That same year, Cohen argued for the inherent reciprocity between Kant's philosophy and Judaism, citing the very same verse to demonstrate the Bible's appeal to reason, by repeatedly coupling the cognition of the foundations of emotional sensibility and will ("Erkenntnis zur Grundlage des Gemütes und des Willens").[43] This distillation of the core ideas of Judaism was effected through citation of verses and phrases originating from Deuteronomy.[44] The recurring bestowal of "laws and judgments" throughout that book,[45] harbored by the appeal to the heart, served well the flow of Cohen's argument for perceiving Judaism as a religion equally amenable to reason and sensibility. The limited scope of his essays on Judaism conveniently permitted eliding the problematics of Sinaitic revelation.

The transition from synoptic overview of Judaism to its systematic presentation in *RdV* forced Cohen to confront Sinai. His point of departure is that philosophy cannot rely on reason alone. As soon as the investigation steps out of pure conceptual speculation into experience, it has to account for three additional factors: (1) the senses and instincts, which humans share with all other animals; (2) consciousness (*Bewußtsein*), which distinguishes human from animal and permits control over the instincts; (3) history, which is the process in which human actions as animals endowed with consciousness unfolds. Cohen concludes: "Reason is the rock out of which the concept [*Begriff*] flows and must initially flow for the sake of the methodological overview [*Einsicht*] when the course is clear, as it is taken to the basin of history."[46]

41. Cohen, *Die Bedeutung*, 21.

42. Cohen, *Die Bedeutung*, 23.

43. Cohen, "Innere Beziehungen der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum," *Bericht der Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin* 28 (1910): 41–61; reprinted in *Hermann Cohens jüdische Schriften*, 1:284–305; here at 290.

44. Cohen, of course, cites Pss 73.25, 28; 51.12 and the Prophets (Jer 17.21; Isa 56.2). But they are used to expand on the fundamental insights derived from Deuteronomy.

45. *Ḥukim u-mishpatim* — Deut 4.5, 8, 14; 6.1; 12.1. On the development of Cohen's interpretation of *ḥok u-mishpat* leading up to *RdV*, see Aharon She'ar Yashuv, "Hermann Cohen über Chok und Mischpat," in *"Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums": Tradition und Ursprungsdenken in Hermann Cohens Spätwerk*, ed. H. Holzhey, G. Motzkin, and H. Wiedebach (Zurich, 1998), 381–402, especially 381–86.

46. *RdV*, 6; *RoR*, 5.

Religion permits the regulation of consciousness and history, whereas its integration with reason "turns religion to a universal function of human consciousness."[47] The religion of reason is created out of the sources of Judaism as, "fundamentally, the all [*das Ganze*] is prefigured in the sources."[48] Cohen demonstrates this claim through an exposition offering a bird's-eye view of the textual history of Judaism from the Bible through the Middle Ages, which rests on the same Deuteronomistic groundwork he laid in the abovementioned lectures.[49] As the "unmediated spirit [*Geist*] of the primordial essence of Judaism, the idea of the singular God [*der Idee des Einziger Gottes*]," Cohen posits Deut 6.5: "Hear O Israel [. . .] the Eternal is One."[50] In contradistinction, morality as promulgated in the "laws and judgments" of the Deuteronomistic covenant constitutes the core of the Torah.[51] And this very expression is the keystone in the arch Cohen constructs between Jewish religion and reason. His bid to overthrow Kant's fundamental distinction between the autonomous imperative of ethics and the heteronomous imperative of law led Cohen to argue for an inherent connection between morality and legal science, almost to the point of identity. His primary aim was to release morality from its introversion by rational reflection, facilitating a direct and natural transition into the public sphere and the world of action. Deuteronomy's "laws and judgments" were therefore instrumental in providing the reasoning this move required.[52] Concurrently, they are the unifying principle of textual commentary, the creative activity responsible for the perpetual development of Jewish tradition:

> Halakhah is the legislated law [*Gesetz*] according to Deuteronomy [. . .] and theoretical law [*Recht*] is directly bound up with logic. And so [halakhah], this science of jurisprudence [*Rechtswissenschaft*], must have brought about the discovery and development of these rules [of textual interpretation], whereby the derivation of specific legal cases is guided

47. *RdV*, 8; *RoR*, 7.

48. *RdV*, 27–28; *RoR*, 24.

49. For a superficial survey of Cohen's Deuteronomistic interpretation of Sinai, see Jehuda Melber, *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, 1968), 133–40.

50. *RdV*, 28; *RoR*, 24. The above wording reflects Cohen's translation of the verse: "*Höre Israel* [. . .] *der Ewige is Einzig*."

51. "The teachings [*Lehren; torot*] are manifested [. . .] in Deuteronomy as judgments and laws [*Satzungen und Rechte; ḥukim u-mishpatim*]." *RdV*, 32; *RoR*, 28.

52. Sinai Ucko, "Maḥshavto ha-Datit shel Hermann Cohen," *Dat ha-tevunah mi-mekorot ha-yahadut*, trans. Z. Wislawski, ed. H. S. Bergman and N. Rotenstreich (Jerusalem, 1971), 9–10.

and regulated by juristic principles. The praxis had therefore introduced this *logical theory* in these sources of Judaism.[53]

But already in Deuteronomy the judgments and laws possess a manifest moral character. And in the same way that prophecy is linked to them, and in the same way that out of these prophecies (biblical) poetry emerges, this confluence (*Zusammenfluß*) is also further refined (*fortbildet*) in the Oral Torah.[54]

The emergence of the Oral Torah, and its branching out to different genres (halakhah and aggadah) reinforced, rather than undermined, the unity of scriptures as the sources of the religion of reason: "In all of those stylistic forms [the Oral Torah] had to retain this value as a source [*diesen Quellenwert*]. They are all carried from their very foundation by a single *logic*, a methodological deduction."[55] This organic integrity has been amplified by the intimate connection of each and every Jew with the scriptures as a living text; that is, a text that has direct and overarching bearing on one's life through its eternal laws and judgments, which are dynamic in their perpetual evolution through the Oral Torah. Cohen articulates this latter principle, implicit in earlier references to "Hear O Israel" through his reworking of the famous verses in Deut 30.11–14: "The Torah is not in heaven, but in your hearts."[56] Here Cohen makes his only reference to Sinai in his historical exposition. To drive his argument for the perpetuation of the Torah as a living body of divine knowledge further, he presents the rabbinical phrase *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* as evidence. The term does not denote "a summation of the study of scripture [*eine Überhebung der Schriftgelehrten*]"; such an understanding is based on historical ignorance. Rather, he contends, it captures the sensitivity of the Deuteronomistic dictum to keep the Torah in mouth and heart.[57] The phrase "is the outflow of a critical self-consciousness concerning the written laws."[58] The *RdV* annotations refer to rabbinic sources (bBer 5a[59] and ExodR 28.5). Indeed,

53. *RdV*, 32; *RoR*, 27–28. Emphasis in the original.

54. *RdV*, 32; *RoR*, 27–28.

55. *RdV*, 33; *RoR*, 28–29.

56. "Die Thora is nicht im Himmel, sondern in deinem Herzen." *RdV*, 33; *RoR*, 28–29. Cohen replaces here "commandment" (v. 11) with Torah, based on the rabbinical reading of this passage in bBM 59b ("Said R. Yehoshua: 'It is not in heaven.' What [is meant] by 'not in heaven'? Said R. Yirmiah: for the Torah has already been given at Mt. Sinai").

57. Which Cohen repeatedly bases on Deut 30.14: "It is in your mouth and in your heart."

58. *RdV*, 33; *RoR*, 28.

59. *RdV*, 535 (erroneously listed in the book as bBer 9).

Cohen's interpretation of the term appears to faithfully reflect its intended meaning in the sources.[60] There is only one crucial difference: instead of validating the present expansion of the Torah by harking to the singularity and majesty of the revelatory event, Cohen performs an almost perfect Hegelian sublation of Sinai, as he invokes it in order to move beyond it to a completely different understanding of revelation. In the constellation made up of reason, religion, and the sources of Judaism within Cohen's system, "Revelation is the creation of reason."[61] And so, chapter 4 of *RdV*, titled "Revelation," presents Cohen's attempt to accommodate the miraculous, singular nature of the Sinaitic revelation within his system. The relation between reason and humanity is preconditioned and, as such, "it cannot be a miracle; it cannot be an anomaly."[62] Clearly, the covenant at Sinai cannot support this postulate; therefore, at this point the Deuteronomistic covenant usurps the Exodus version of the Sinai scene as the Bible's foundational account of revelation.

The books of Moses contain a dual form, which tradition has always acknowledged, insofar as the fifth book, Deuteronomy, was called Repetition of the Torah (*Mishneh Torah*). This repetition (*Wiederholung*) seems to have broken through the naivety; for clearly it must include a reflection on the contents that the former books have relayed in a more naive portrayal (*Darstellung*). Deuteronomy's higher vantage point is so remarkable that one may say that it endows the written Torah (*Schriftlehre*) with a special privilege (*besonderes Glück*).[63]

Cohen's translation of *mishneh torah* as *Wiederholung der Thora*, rather than copy (*Doppel*),[64] emphasizes the revisionary function of Deuteronomy and

60. According to Shmuel Safrai, the two main uses of the term were to authenticate halakhot lacking formal grounding (e.g., mPe'ah 2.6; m'Ed 5.7; mYad 4.3) and to assert the authority of sages as deriving from their inclusion in the chain of transmission that began at Sinai (e.g., mPe'ah 2.6: "I have received from R. Mishash who received from Aba who received from the pairs [of rabbinic sages] who received from the prophets *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*."

Yet the most convincing claim that the rabbis appear to advance with this term, beginning with R. Akiba, is that all halakhic innovations are part of the Torah given to Moses at Sinai (bMen 29b). Shmuel Safrai, "Halackah le-Moshe mi-Sinai—Historiyah o Teologiyah?," *Proceedings of the World Jewish Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 9, division C: *Jewish Thought and Literature* (Jerusalem, 1985), 23–30; esp. 26–27.

61. *RdV*, 84; *RoR*, 72.

62. *RdV*, 84; *RoR*, 72.

63. *RdV*, 84; *RoR*, 73. For Cohen's critique of the translation of Torah as law (*Gesetz*), see *Die Bedeutung*, 23.

64. Compare the Buber-Rosenzweig translation ad loc: "Schreibe er sich den Doppel dieser Weisung auf ein Buch" (he shall write the copy of this instruction in a book).

the Pentateuch's "naivety" as the subject of revision.[65] The interpretation of Ex 19–20 that follows indeed breaks through the theophany of the account. The later Deuteronomistic covenant relates to Exodus as an eclipsing moon to the sun, creating a perfectly symmetrical disc of the two superimposed bodies illuminated by the effulgence peeking from behind it.

Fire is no mere metaphor in this context. The description of "Mount Sinai engulfed with smoke, because the Lord has descended upon it in fire" (Ex 19.18) and its repetition in Deut 4.11 pose an ontological as well as a grave theological problem for Cohen. As a major element in the miraculous nature of the Sinai scene, the fire on the mount contributes to the shaping of this revelation as singular and reinforces the impression of an unmediated encounter between God and Israel. According to Cohen's theology, fire is a key symbol of idolatry,[66] which in the context of Sinai threatens to cement the theophany as an event with physical, material, and corporeal manifestations.

Cohen's solution to this complex problem is to sublate Sinai through a radically abstract reading of Deut 4.11–16.[67] The denial of the ocular manifestation of Ex 24.11, "The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of fire [. . .] and you did not see an image,"[68] is added a denial of its auditory manifestation as well. Instead of translating *kol ∂evarim* as "the sound of words" (Buber-Rosenzweig) or "the voice of words" (Luther), Cohen renders the expression as "a voice of words" (*eine Stimme von Worten*), to advance the claim that "it was not the voice, but the words alone were discernible [. . .] one mustn't understand hearing as understanding [*Verstehen*] [. . .] so that

65. In rabbinic literature, *mishneh torah* became a metonym for the fifth book of the Pentateuch, based on Deut 18.17: "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law [*mishneh ha-torah hazot*]." "Deuteronomy" is a latinization of the Septuagint's translation of *mishneh torah* as *∂euteronomon* — "second, or repeated, law" (δευτερο-νόμιον). Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1940), available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Ddeuterono%2Fmion. Needless to say, Maimonides' use of the term as the title of his halakhic codex was not lost on Cohen.

66. *R∂V*, 65; *RoR*, 55–56, cites Isa 44.19: "No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

67. *R∂V*, 85; *RoR*, 74.

68. Compare Marc Zvi Brettler, "'Fire, Cloud and Deep Darkness' (Deuteronomy 5:22): Deuteronomy's Recasting of Revelation," in *The Significance of Sinai*, 24–25.

it is only an internal spiritual hearing [*nur das innere geistige Hören*]."[69] The inevitable conclusion is that "any materiality is to be removed from revelation."[70] Moses, then, is the teacher (*Lehrer*) of monotheism, rather than messenger (*Verkünder*) of God's word.[71]

Wary of the opposite danger of dissolving Sinai into complete abstraction, Cohen returns to elaborate further his argument for the continued presence of revelation in the life of Israel. To recall, in his introduction he established an organic connection between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah; now, he turns to bridge the gap by addressing the intrabiblical continuity of revelatory presence. Having defused the corporeal-factual potential of the revelation and having claimed that the Deuteronomistic reflection on the earlier account does not cross the boundary of complete rationalization of Sinai to the point of its dissolution,[72] Cohen argues that "the spirit of Deuteronomy lives in the prophets in virtue of the new covenant [*brit ḥadashah*] that Jeremiah (31.30) envisages on God's behalf. This covenant rests on the very same foundations of the Deuteronomistic covenant, which the other two major prophets reiterate: Isaiah's new spirit [*ruaḥ ḥadashah*] and Ezekiel's new heart [*lev ḥadash*]."[73]

And so, instead of emptying Sinai of content completely, Cohen insists on its relevance, which lives on in the liturgy (where God is called the giver of the Torah—*noten ha-torah*):

> The Giving [of the Torah] hides no mystery [. . .] there is no esoteric secret [*Geheimnis*] there [. . .] God gives the Torah, the way he gives everything, life and bread, and death as well. Revelation is reason's testament [*das Zeugnis der Vernunft*], which is not creaturely sense, but comes from God, and is bound up with God.[74]

In accommodating Sinai through the mediation of the "revised Torah" of Deuteronomy, Cohen admits, if only implicitly, to the "idealization [of Sinai] through its internalization into the spirit of humans."[75] He thus remains sensitive to the sources he idealizes and to their profound impact. And so, he describes the final aim of his critique of the theophany as the

69. *RdV*, 85–86; *RoR*, 74.
70. *RdV*, 86; *RoR*, 74.
71. *RdV*, 87-88; *RoR*, 75–76.
72. *RdV*, 94; *RoR*, 81.
73. *RdV*, 95; *RoR*, 82.
74. *RdV*, 97; *RoR*, 83–84.
75. *RdV*, 94; *RoR*, 81.

laying of "Sinai in humans' hearts,"[76] where love and law, reason and passion, cohabit.

FRANZ ROSENZWEIG: THE SINAITIC DIALECTIC

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was directly involved in shaping Franz Rosenzweig's interpretation of Sinai. Having known each other since the mid-1910s, Buber and Rosenzweig became close friends in 1922 when the author of the *Star* sought the advice of the celebrated thinker concerning the translation of Judah Halevi's poems. Their friendship, which three years later would evolve into partnership in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, included intensive correspondence. Sinai became the subject of a fascinating epistolary debate in which Buber urged his younger friend to reconsider his openness to the traditional axiom *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*, by asserting that the validity of Jewish law is constituted by the acceptance of Sinaitic revelation.

By 1922, Rosenzweig had devoted considerable thought to the place of revelation in Jewish tradition in general, and its occurrence at Sinai in particular. His selection of the Song of Solomon as the biblical setting for the investigation of revelation in his system and placement of this discussion at the heart of his magnum opus have been beguiling and inspiring readers for nearly a century.[77] This section, which we may safely describe as the linchpin of the system of the *Star* as a whole, is moored in the rabbinic discourse on the Torah as revelation and as such accepts Sinaitic revelation as foundational to the encounter between God and humans.

"Stark wie der Tod ist Liebe"—"Love is strong as death." With these opening words of his chapter on revelation in the *Star*,[78] Rosenzweig demonstrates how the verses of Scripture bear testimony to the truth of his systematic investigation. In Song 8.6, the introductory declaration[79] and concluding statement[80] of the *Star* are fused together. The dialectic

76. *RdV*, 98; *RoR*, 84.

77. The literature on the subject is vast. The following studies are particularly relevant to the current context: Galli, "There Is Only One Language," in *Translating*, 360–98; Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Better Than Wine: Love, Poetry and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* (Atlanta, 1996), 83–88; Cass Fisher, *Contemplative Nation: A Philosophical Account of Jewish Theological Language* (Stanford, Calif., 2010), 157–62, 201–6.

78. *Stern*, 174; *Star*, 156. Unless noted otherwise, all translations are mine. For ease of reference, corresponding pages in the English translation will be noted.

79. "Vom Tode, von der Furcht des Todes, hebt alles Erkennen des All an" (From death, from the fear of death, originates all cognition of the All). *Stern*, 3; *Star*, 3.

80. "Wohinaus aber öffenen sich die Flügel des Tors? Du weißt es nicht? INS LEBEN" (Whither, then, do the wings of the gate open? You know it not? INTO LIFE). *Stern*, 472; *Star*, 424.

between the quest for universal knowledge driven by the fear of death, on the one hand, and the desire to defy death by living as a unique individual, on the other hand, is attained through God's love for each and every person, "first and last name," among us and is reflected in earthly love between humans.[81] These insights cannot, however, be extracted from the literal meaning of the scroll.

A tapestry of erotic gestures and romantic yearnings, this biblical text acquired its revelatory significance from a long line of religious interpretations, only to be secularized by Enlightenment readings such as those of Herder and Goethe. Rosenzweig devotes the grammatical analysis with which he concludes the biblical readings of part 2 in the *Star* to recast the text as the core of the divine path of creation, revelation, and redemption along which his system progresses. By doing so, he claims that past allegorical readings of the Song were premised on the notion that human love is based on the template of God's love for Israel:[82] "One simply knew that the I and Thou of human discourse is without more ado also the I and Thou between God and man."[83] The secularizing readings that reduced the text to a collection of love lyrics, then, excluded the possibility of encountering God in interpersonal relations of love, opting for the Spinozist, pantheistic (and for Rosenzweig, pagan) alternative of finding God in nature or in culture.[84]

Moreover, Rosenzweig may be understood as demolishing an allegorical divide between an "earthly," or "secular," stratum, and an underlying "divine" stratum. Like Rosenzweig's understanding of the relation between philosophy and theology, both earthly and divine meanings inhere in the verses indissolubly. Hence, accepting one while rejecting the other is simply impossible.[85] Finally, Rosenzweig bases this reading of the Song of Solomon on the hermeneutic leitmotif of R. Ishmael that recurs throughout the *Star*: God speaks in human parlance.[86] Mara Benjamin drives this point

81. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Between Sensual and Heavenly Love: Franz Rosenzweig's Reading of the Song of Songs," in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination; Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, ed. D. A. Green and L. S. Lieber (Oxford, 2009), 313–16.

82. Samuel Moyn, "Divine and Human Love: Franz Rosenzweig's History of the Song of Songs," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12.2 (2005): 198.

83. *Stern*, 222; *Star*, 199.

84. Moyn, "Divine and Human Love," 204.

85. Inken Rühle, "Das Hohelied—ein weltliches Liebeslied also Kernbuch der Offerbarung? Zur Bedeutung der Auslegungsgeschichte von Schir haSchirim im Stern der Erlösung," in *Rosenzweig als Leser: Kontextuelle Kommentare zum "Stern der Erlösung,"* ed. M. Brasser (Tübingen, 2004), 476.

86. Rühle, "Das Hohelied," 477; Kronberg Greenberg, *Better Than Wine,* 83.

even further, observing that "Rosenzweig aims to close the hermeneutic gap between the 'literal' and the 'allegorical' reading of the Song because language [. . .] allows the human and the divine to intermingle."[87] And this nexus, according to Benjamin, is established only in the Song, "recast as the single instance of true allegory."[88]

Both Samuel Moyn and Inken Rühle comment on Rosenzweig's selective use of the interpretive history of the scroll. Rühle politely describes his take as "idealized,"[89] while Moyn is more forthright: "His [interpretive] history is riddled with errors and exaggerations [. . .] and is designed more as a moral fable than as objective account."[90] Neither, however, considers this fault to detract from the force of Rosenzweig's theological argument. Yet Rosenzweig's unobtrusive references in this section to the Bible's constitutive encounter between God and Israel at Sinai certainly call for clarification. This point, which eluded Moyn and Rühle, prompts Benjamin to accuse Rosenzweig of "hermeneutical hubris"[91] and of reinventing the content of revelation to suit his own purposes: "No longer is the primary meaning of revelation the experience of a people gathered together awaiting the commanding voice of God that imparts the teachings and burden of the written and oral law."[92]

As we shall see, Rosenzweig's understanding of the Sinaitic revelation was not dismissive, as Benjamin has it, but accommodating of, and interwoven with, alternative traditions to the Sinai narrative.

* * *

As Sommer points out, Rosenzweig's grammatical analysis of the Song of Solomon is based on an interplay between the scroll and the revelation at Sinai. Understanding it as a shift of emphasis away from Sinai, rather than its erasure or silencing, reveals a striking resemblance with Daniel Boyarin's analysis of early midrashic readings of the Song.[93]

87. Mara Benjamin, *Rosenzweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge, 2009), 55.

88. Benjamin, *Rosenzweig's Bible*, 55.

89. Rühle, "Das Hohelied," 472–73.

90. Moyn, "Divine and Human Love," 210.

91. Benjamin, *Rosenzweig's Bible*, 63.

92. Benjamin, *Rosenzweig's Bible*, 56.

93. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington Ind., 1994), 105–16. An earlier and longer Hebrew version was published as Boyarin, "Two Introductions to the Midrash on the 'Song of Songs'" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 56.5 (1987): 479–500.

In his study, Boyarin seeks to dispel the thesis that traditional interpretations of the Song of Songs are by necessity allegorical, presenting attempts to break a "lock to which the key has been lost."[94] Boyarin posits Maimonides' introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed* as epitomizing this perception.[95] In the philosopher's view, the literal meaning of the scroll is so far removed from philosophical truth and reason that its only possible function is as a parable (*maʃhal*) that can "communicate to the select few truth[s], *which cannot be formulated in any other way*."[96] Boyarin contrasts this view with readings of early tannaitic midrashim that juxtapose verses of Torah and verses from the Prophets and Writings to decipher the meaning of both. He shows how references to the Song in the midrashic interpretation of Exodus explain the meaning of difficult passages in the Israelites' flight from Egypt[97] and also clarify the meaning of puzzling verses in the Song. Boyarin identifies two functions of the scroll as an exegetical key in the hands of the tannaim: (1) the early midrashic authors read it as a metaphorical guide to the parting of the Red Sea and Sinaitic revelation;[98] and (2) R. Akiba's privileging of the Song in mYad 3.5, commonly read as the authoritative affirmation of its esoteric content, is in fact praise for the literary qualities of the scroll, thanks to which they may be employed to interpret perplexing verses in Exodus.[99]

94. Boyarin is quoting here Pseudo Sa'adia; *Intertextuality*, 479.

95. Boyarin, "Two Introductions," 480–83. The English version of the article replaces the exposition of Maimonides' view with Origen's; see Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 108–9.

96. Boyarin, "Two Introductions," 481, emphasis in the original.

97. For example, *Yitro* 19.17 in *Mekhilta de-rabi Shimon bar Yoḥai*, ed. Y. N. H. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem, 1956), 143. Akiba sets up an interplay between Exodus and the Song of Solomon in which an obscure image from the scroll is employed to rationalize the Israelites' approach to the mountain to witness God's descent, and consequently the image's interpretive function rescues it from obscurity: "R. Akiba decoded the verse *in the hour they ʃtood before Mt. Sinai* [Ex 19.17]. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the ʃteep* [Song 2.14], for they were in the hiding places of Sinai. *Show me your viʃage*, as it says, *And all of the people ʃaw the voiceʃ* [Ex 20.14]—*Let me hear your voice*, this is the voice from before the commandments, for it says, *All that you ʃay we will do and we will hear* [Ex 24.7]—*For your voice iʃ pleaʃant*; this is the voice after the commandments, as it says, *God haʃ heard the voice of your ʃpeaking; that which you have ʃaid iʃ goodly* [Deut 5.25]." Quoted and translated in Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 114; emphasis in the original.

98. Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 114.

99. The decisive evidence is in R. Eliezer's expansion on R. Akiba: "R. Eliezer ben Azaria used a parable. A man took one se'ah [measure] of wheat to the baker [and] told him: produce for me fine flour [*kemaḥ ʃolet*], produce for me finer flour [*kluʃkaia kemaḥ ve-ʃolet*]. He said, in the same way not all of [King] Solomon's wisdom is fine flour, but the Song of Solomon; for Israel, the Song of Solomon is

Boyarin's analysis resonates with Rosenzweig's alternation in the *Star* between the Song and Ex 19–20. While Rosenzweig dubs the Song of Solomon the "core book of revelation" (*Kernbuch der Offenbarung*),[100] his long description of God's loving relationship with humanity, which culminates with his reading of the Song, is interspersed with subtle allusions to Sinai. Rosenzweig opens his reading by stating that the I (*Ich*) speaking in the scroll is not intoned as often in any other book in the Bible (except Proverbs); but the voice of the speaking I, "the root-word of the entire revelatory dialogue, as well as the seal,[101] which every word imprints [. . . is] 'I am the Eternal.'"[102] In spite of its inherent revelatory nature, the Song is not self-contained; the agent that makes the amorous dialogue possible, whose words are the seal imprinted on the loving-beloved partner, is God's opening statement in the Decalogue. What is more, the utterance's original context of lawgiving is not drowned in a sea of love but posited as God's self-assertion of presence that accompanies each individual commandment.[103] Concurrently, Rosenzweig avoids the clash between Moses's instrumental role as mediator at Sinai and the unmediated nature of the God-person dialogue in Song by mentioning him in passing.

Another "Sinaitic thread" woven into Rosenzweig's discussion is the repeated reference to God's *need* of Israel as witnesses in order to be a revealed God: "When you are my witnesses, I am God, and not otherwise,"[104] and "When you confess to me, I am."[105] These are two different translations of a statement brought in the name of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai (to whom Rosenzweig refers as *der Meister der Kabbalah*) from the midrashic anthology Pesikta de Rav Kahana (hereafter: PRK)[106]:

> I have declared, and saved and proclaimed and there is no stranger among you and you are my witnesses, says YAHWEH and I am a God"

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the finest of songs, the noblest of songs, the most adorned of songs" (SongR 1, 5.11 [Vilna]). Cf. Boyarin, "Two Introductions," 493–96.

100. *Stern*, 225; *Star*, 202.

101. "Set me as a seal upon your heart" (Song 8.6).

102. This reflects Rosenzweig's translation of Ex 20.2: "I am YAHWEH your God."

103. *Stern*, 198; *Star*, 178.

104. *Stern*, 191; *Star*, 171.

105. *Stern*, 203; *Star*, 182.

106. Dated to the fifth century C.E., the text's first critical edition was published only in 1987 (see Rachel A. Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* [Leiden, 2009], 194–95). Rosenzweig's acquaintance with Pesikta is therefore an enigma meriting further exploration.

> (Is 43.12) [. . .] R. Shimon ben Yoḥai has taught: "If you are my witnesses, says the Lord," I am God, and if you are not my witnesses, *if one dares speak thus* [כביכול], I am not the Lord.[107]

Editing out the qualifying "if one dares speak thus" (כביכול, *kiviakhol*), Rosenzweig heightens the drama of Shimon bar Yoḥai's extrapolation of divine speech from Isa 43.12, which the PRK applies ad loc as metaphor for Sinaitic revelation.[108] According to this interpretation, the soul's confessional reply endows (*gewinnt*) God for the first time with revelatory being.[109]

The implication of Rosenzweig's citation from the PRK for my interpretation of his reading of Song is crucial. The fact that he cites it twice in the same discussion, alongside another citation[110] from the PRK's commentary on Ex 19–20, means that he was aware, if only superficially, of the sophisticated intertextual interplay of early midrashic commentaries on Sinaitic revelation. Hence, the similarities I have pointed out between Rosenzweig's reading and Boyarin's observations on midrashic intertextuality are not merely an interesting analogy; they attest to Rosenzweig's adaptation of this exegetical strategy of rabbinic commentaries on Sinaitic revelation. Indeed, Rosenzweig's intertextual method diverges from early midrash. By crowning the Song the locus of divine revelation in the Hebrew Bible, he diverts readers' attention away from Sinai. But by making extensive use of insertions from Ex 19–20, he keeps its memory alive.

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After completing his magnum opus, Rosenzweig continued to explore additional aspects of Sinai. "Spirit and Epochs of Jewish History," a lecture he gave in Kassel in the autumn of 1919,[111] provides important insights into his metahistorical interpretation of Sinai. Noting that myth shrouded in mist sometimes tells us more than the sand dug out with shovels,[112] Rosen-

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107. PRK (ed. Mandelbaum, 1962) 12.6, emphasis mine.

108. "'I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,' says the LORD. 'I am God' (Is 43.12). 'I declared, in Egypt [. . .] and saved, at sea [. . .] and proclaimed, at Sinai.'"

109. *Stern*, 202; *Star*, 181.

110. PRK 12.24, in *Stern*, 462; *Star*, 416.

111. Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen der Jüdischen Geschichte," in *Zweistromland*, 527–38. The lecture was first published in Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), 12–25. It was translated in Manfred H. Vogel, *Rosenzweig on Profane/Secular History* (Atlanta, 1996).

112. Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen," 533.

zweig emphasizes the historical significance of the *reception* of Sinai, rather than its status as a historically verifiable event.

In the lecture, Rosenzweig describes the corpus of rabbinic literature (to which he refers rather abstractedly as "the Talmud"), as the bridge over the deep rift that the destruction of the Second Temple had threatened to tear in Jewish history.[113] Thus, he erases the dividing line that the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. has drawn in contemporary histories of Judaism, arguing that the Jewish people's exit from political history and their assumption of purely spiritual existence was made possible by the Talmud.[114] As Jewish history continued to unfold, Rosenzweig contends, it did so by traveling the road paved by the Talmud, until branching away from it with the advent of modernity.[115] Rabbinic literature, which rests its foundations on Sinai, has an empirically verifiable role in the withdrawal of the Jewish people from history, which Rosenzweig emphasizes by citing Heinrich Graetz as supporting evidence.[116]

But when pressed to endorse the rabbinic theory of the Torah's divine origin, Rosenzweig responds with dismay[117] or cynicism. In "The Builders,"[118] a letter he wrote to Buber in 1923 as part of their debate on the place of halakhah in Jewish life, Rosenzweig offers a listing of midrashic "greatest hits" about the Sinaitic revelation.[119] He goes on to say that Jews who read those midrashim uncritically accept them as "fact" (quotation marks in the original) and rely on "pseudo-historical and pseudo-juridical" validations of Law and therefore their readings must be rejected.[120]

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113. Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen," 532–33.

114. Rosenzweig is using Halevi's biological metaphor from the *Book of the Kuzari* 2.32–44, but the notion derives from the Talmudic notion that Israel does not follow the fate of other nations. A similar interpretation of Jewish history is also found in the writings of the Maharal. See Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 293–94.

115. Rosenzweig uses the same road-bridge metaphor in a letter to Rudolph Hallo (*BT* 2, 763).

116. Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen," 532.

117. At the suggestion to accept the Weltanschauung whereby the world was in chaos until the moment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai (bSan 97a) Rosenzweig replies to Rudolph Hallo: "*Pfui*!" (*BT* 2, 766).

118. Franz Rosenzweig, "Die Bauleute: Über das Gesetz," in *Zweistromland*, 699–712; the letter was sent in the summer of 1923. Quotes are from the English translation: Rosenzweig, "The Builders: Concerning the Law," in Glatzer, *On Jewish Learning*, 72–92.

119. Rosenzweig, "The Builders," 78–79.

120. Rosenzweig, "The Builders," 79–80. If he were to end the discussion with the midrashic references, Horwitz's reading of it as reinforcing the written Torah with midrashim on its mythical dimension would have been accurate. But her

Rosenzweig maintains, "It is the Law's *Heutigkeit*, its living, contemporary reality that grants it religious validity,"[121] coining the term by drawing on Deut 5.3 ("Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day") and noting, "It is upon us to accept the challenge of this boldness."[122] Conceding Buber's insistence that the foundation of the mitzvot remains unknowable to us,[123] Rosenzweig was forced to qualify his acceptance in the *Star* of "I am the Lord your God" as a part of revelation:

> Revelation is not Law-giving. It is only this: Revelation. *The primary content of revelation is revelation itself*. וירד [*va-yered*, "He came down"]—this already concludes the revelation; וידבר [*va-yedaber*, "He spoke"] is the beginning of interpretation and certainly אנכי [*anokhi*, "I am"]. But where does this "interpretation" stop being legitimate? I would never dare to state this in a general sentence; here commences the right of experience to give testimony, positive and negative.[124]

Ultimately, Rosenzweig's position on Jewish law as grounded in revelation appears to be uncharacteristically lenient: in his "theological court," the lack of more substantial evidence to support the validity of Jewish law serves as grounds for an exemption from the burden of proof that any other legal system is bound by, not for its dismissal. His confident reliance on the verses that ratify the notion of *Heutigkeit* may be considered similarly: Rosenzweig does not explain to us on what grounds these verses are more reliable than the ones from the scene at Mt. Sinai: "But in spite of my conviction, as I concede to a Christian a historic and personal right to prove

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citation from "The Builders" excludes the criticism of pseudo-justifications of halakhah. See Rivka Horwitz, "Revelation and Scripture in the Twentieth Century," in Cohen, *Star and Man*, 224–25.

121. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Rosenzweig and Kant: Two Views of Ritual and Religion," in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, 1991), 299. For a comprehensive discussion of Rosenzweig's use of *Heutigkeit*, see 298–301, and Mendes-Flohr, "Law and Sacrament: Ritual Observance in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. A. Green (New York, 1989), 327–32.

122. Rosenzweig, "The Builders," 87.

123. "Of course I cannot draw a dividing line between revelation and the command to Abraham 'Get thee out' (Gen. 12:1); nor between revelation and 'I am the Lord your God' (Exod 20:2); but I must draw it between revelation and 'You shall have no other gods' (v.3)." Buber to Rosenzweig, July 5, 1924, translated in "Revelation and Law," in Glatzer, *On Jewish Learning*, 114.

124. Letter to Martin Buber of June 5, 1925, translated in Rosenzweig, "Revelation and Law," 118. Rosenzweig wrote the verbs in Hebrew, emphasis mine.

an exception, so I believe in the right of the Law to prove its character as an exception against all other types of law."[125]

Hence, Rosenzweig's fundamental view of the Bible hangs in the tense relationship between wishful thoughts and defensible claims. This tension, however, is camouflaged by Rosenzweig's focus on the way in which they operate in two defensible temporal dimensions: personal experience and historical reception.

CONCLUSION

After communicating the Decalogue to Moses, God asks him to reaffirm the experience of the revelatory encounter to the Israelites: "Thus shall you tell the children of Israel: You yourselves have seen that I spoke to you from heaven" (Ex 20.22). If the witnesses to the revelation at Sinai needed a reminder, it should come as no surprise that later generations grappled with the event: foundational and awe-inspiring yet confounding and dubious. Cohen and Rosenzweig were clearly attentive to the conflict that Sinaitic revelation creates. Their intellectual sophistication and identification with the modernist ethos did nothing to break the spell of revelation in their eyes. Yet the mystery of divine-human encounters could be explained away neither by sentimental praise nor by dogmatic rationalizations.

Maimonides' and Spinoza's analyses of the Sinai scene presented a polarity that offered equally intolerable alternatives for the German Jewish thinkers. Spinoza's critique dissolved altogether the uniqueness of the Sinaitic theophany and pointed out the features it shares with all of God's encounters with humans in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The philosophical conclusion of this analysis was that philosophy and theology address different subjects, and that revelation is strictly in the domain of the latter discipline. For his part, Maimonides emphasized the singular nature of the event. He tried to overcome the difficult ontological questions that the theophany raises, by focusing on Moses's instrumental role in the transmission of God's word. And he resorted to the authority of the rabbinic sages in an attempt to distance himself from the inexplicable mysteries of the biblical account of the event.

Cohen and Rosenzweig were not prepared to defend the philosophical legitimacy of Sinai at all costs like Maimonides. Yet they refused to go as far as dissolving the Jewish exegetical tradition altogether to pry philosophy away from it, like Spinoza. As I sought to demonstrate in this essay, both Cohen and Rosenzweig chose alternative prooftexts to support the orientation of their analysis of revelation: Cohen's focus on law found its grounding in Deut 4–5, while Rosenzweig's focus on love was steeped in

125. Rosenzweig, "Revelation and Law," 118.

the verses of the Song of Solomon. They carefully developed the intertextual links with Ex 19 and 20 to acknowledge its status as the ultimate description of divine revelation in Scripture. And so, instead of ignoring it, dissolving its importance, or celebrating it with untenable arguments, Cohen and Rosenzweig used intertextual interpretations to construct Sinai as a memory preserved in the Written Torah and transformed it into the cornerstone of Jewish tradition in the Oral Torah.

The multiple ways by which the two philosophers relied on rabbinic literature to complete their interpretive strategies is the most subtle and illuminating aspect of their reception of the revelation at Sinai. Implicit references to rabbinic sources (Cohen: bBer 5a and ExodR; Rosenzweig: PRK), are tacit expressions of formidable inspiration that Cohen and Rosenzweig drew from rabbinic literature by adapting rabbinic hermeneutic strategies in support of their philosophical analyses of divine revelation. The key strategy that the Marburg philosopher and his younger counterpart employed was intertextuality, and its primary manifestation was a shift of emphasis away from Exodus and onto other books of the Bible. By placing the source text at the heart of the discussion and embedding commentaries old and new, neither turning it into a mummified object of scientific study nor blindingly accepting dogmas derived from it, Cohen and Rosenzweig showed that the legacy of Sinai may live on to this day.

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