ORTHODOXY AND THE CHALLENGE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION[1]

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The following article is divided into three parts:
Part I (sections 1-4) offers a precise definition of the challenge that biblical criticism poses to Orthodoxy, and a brief survey of the accepted solutions thus far. These solutions are based on the understanding that justification for religious truth claims relies on the degree of their correspondence with an empirically observable reality.
Part II (sections 5-11) tracks the development of an alternative strategy which seeks to develop a more satisfactory response for contemporary Orthodoxy by diverting the discussion to another plane. This plane, which is associated with a post-liberal approach and with constructivist views of truth, focuses on the role and significance of such truth claims in the life of the religious believer.
Part III (sections 12-18) relates to a psychological need to nevertheless bridge the gap between empiricism and functionalism in religious discourse, and

[1] The phrasing of this subtitle draws inspiration from Cynthia Ozik's article: "Notes on Finding the Right Question", in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 21983), pp. 120-151, which begins by citing Suzanne K. Langer's observation, that "every answer is concealed in the question that elicits it, and that what we must strive to do, then is not look for the right answer but attempt rather to discover the right question". Without wishing to take any position here regarding the issue which provoked Ozik's interest in this observation (i.e., the source for women's ostensibly subordinate status in Judaism) or her conclusion (i.e., that the right question to ask in this case is sociological; for a rival view, see Judith Plaskow's response, "The Right Question is Theological", in the same volume), I concur with the general principle and believe that it is particularly germane to the issue at hand.

This is also the occasioin to acknowledge the contribution of two separate think tanks towards the formulation of this article: (a) the seminar on "Orthodoxy, theological debate and the legacy of Louis Jacobs", sponsored by the Oxford center for Advanced Jewish Studies convened during the year of 2013, (b) the workshop of rabbis and educators conducted under the auspices of Bet Morasha in Jerusalem during the years 2012 and 2013. Both groups included, amongst others, a few of the scholars mentioned in this article, and provided a rare opportunity for in-depth examination of their respective positions, clarifying the various nuances and issues at stake in a friendly and constructive ambience, and creating the impetus for spelling these out in writing. I would also like to thank Charlotte Katzoff who read the manuscript in its early stages, and offered several important suggestions for elucidating my position. Last but not least is Zev Farber, who conducted a close and sensitive reading of an earlier version of this paper appearing on the online forum Torah and biblical Scholarship (see www.Thetorah.com) that he edits, suggesting references to similar positions previously expressed on that forum, and recommending the injection of various editorial devices such as subtitles and clarification of technical terms, in the effort to render its regrettably heavy style a bit more reader-friendly.

develops a theological response that muddies the sharp distinction between the divine and the human, or the metaphysical and the natural.

I – Difficulties for the Modern Believer

As formulated by Maimonides in his 8th principle of faith,[2] traditional Jewish belief in a divine origin for the Torah entails the notion that the biblical text in our hands today was transmitted by God to Moses, that every word of this text is equally divine and laden with meaning, and that this written text was simultaneously accompanied by an oral commentary.

Critical approaches to the biblical text, which pose problems for this formulation, are not a modern invention. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the scope and intensity of such questions have increased considerably in the past century. Beyond the usual difficulties (erroneous or fallible content, questionable morality, and textual evidence of evolutionary historical development), the development of sophisticated models of textual analysis (such as those generated by hermeneutic theory, computer science, and the feminist critique) has most recently problematized the very notion of divine revelation as verbal communication – given that language itself now appears so pervasively rooted in a particular perspective and cultural bias.

II – Heterodox Responses

Before discussing possible "Orthodox" solutions, it would be useful to first survey some "heterodox" (i.e. non-Orthodox) suggestions that have been proffered. One heterodox response to these difficulties—perhaps the most intuitively obvious one—has been to abandon the notion of divine revelation altogether. Thus, Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, rejects any appeal to metaphysics and transcendence in describing the origins of the Torah. Instead, he prefers to view revelation naturalistically, as the human "discovery" of how to live religiously.

To say that religion is a creation of human beings does not imply that it is a figment of the imagination – religion flows naturally and intuitively from an innate religious impulse. But saying this does relegate an exclusive role to humans in shaping the content of revelation. That content merely expresses the function of God as a process or power *within* the natural order, without reference to any process or power beyond.[3]

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[2] See his commentary to the Mishna, Introduction to *Perek Helek*

[3] Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1958; Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Press, 1967).

Other responses (as represented in the writings of Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Louis Jacobs) that have been rejected by mainstream Orthodoxy, all appear to be variations on Martin Buber's attempt to promote a more nuanced understanding of revelation that does not reject biblical claims to metaphysics altogether.[4] This more complex approach to the biblical text, similar to Protestant "dialectical theology", understands everything in the Torah that is said about God as a human effort to convey or recapture certain genuine meetings with the Divine. Because such meetings were inevitably experienced in a particular linguistic and cultural context that structured the nature of the experience and its interpretation, the question becomes just what and how much of the Godly was revealed in that meeting. This problem is exacerbated when one takes into account the fact that no written or oral report can totally successfully convey these encounters in terms that are entirely free of the influence of historical context.

Differences of opinion regarding how much of our recorded revelation accurately reflects the message of the divine encounter range over a great distance. Some have suggested the minimal notion that the divine element consisted merely in the meeting itself with all resultant texts a human response. Others, taking a more expansive approach, suggest that a complete text was given but that it was (necessarily) distorted, since every human "hearing" involves re-interpretation. A compromise position, situated between these two poles, suggests that a more minimalistic linguistic message was relayed and left for humans to fill in, interpret and expand over time.[5] According to this, what remains for us is to extract the eternal illuminations

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[4] See, for example, Buber's *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* and his magnum opus, *I and Thou*. Buber's approach was very influenced by a concurrent Protestant trend called "dialectic theology," and, in turn, has been very influential on dialectic theologians.

[5] For a brief summary of the distinctions between Heschel's Torah as Midrash (i.e., a human interpretation of some primal content revealed by God), Buber's understanding of Torah as response merely to the revelation of God Himself, and Rosenzweig's understanding that this silent theophany nevertheless also conveyed a general sense of commandedness, see Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew (*Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 22-25. See also Benjamin D. Sommer, "Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology", *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999), pp. 422-451, who builds on a Hassidic teaching attributed to Menachem Mendel of Rymanov, in order to assert that Rosenzweig's conception is rooted in traditional Jewish sources, and Jerome Gellman, "Wellhausen and the Hasidim", *Modern Judaism* 26:2 (May 2006), pp. 193-207 for a rebuttal of this claim. For various formulations of Jacobs regarding biblical reflections of both the human and the divine, see his *We Have Reason to Believe* (London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 1957), pp. 89-90, and in his epilogue to the 4th edition (1995), pp. 139; *God, Torah and Israel* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), p. 50; *A Jewish Theology* (London:Behrman House, 1973), pp. 204-205, p. 225; *The Principles of Jewish Faith: an Analytical Study* (London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 1964), pp. 219, 270-311; *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London/Portland, Oregon.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), pp. 50-51

that the Torah communicates to us from those trappings that are the fruit of passing human experience.

Viewing revelation as a dialogic encounter which entails both human and divine elements appears more satisfactory than Kaplan's reductionism. Instead of understanding the religious experience as merely the product of innately human impulses, this approach acknowledges biblical claims to a supernatural source. However, a theology that relates to the Torah as the product of divine inspiration rather than as a full-fledged word-for-word dictation may not provide sufficient basis for fulfilling the traditional requirement that the entire Torah be viewed as the word of God and that all its details be regarded as equally authoritative and binding.[6]

And so the question remains: Can a document so thoroughly riddled with identifiably dated and partisan human perspectives truly be divine? Can traditionalists develop an approach to the Torah that acknowledges the naturalist explanations of Mordecai Kaplan without his reductionism on the one hand, and simultaneously appropriate the metaphysical claims of dialectical theology without succumbing to its selectivity, on the other?

III – Orthodox solutions thus far

As has been stated clearly by at least one Orthodox scholar, namely R. Mordechai Breuer, biblical criticism is not a theory that one can accept or reject at will.[7] Once one is exposed to its methods and findings, there is no choice but to acknowledge the issues these raise. Contrary to allegations that may have held some truth in the past, contemporary scholars do not formulate their findings regarding the literary genesis of the bible because they don't like Jews or tradition. Rather, academic Bible scholars view their conclusions as inescapably rational and compelling. They may argue regarding this or that particular version of the documentary hypothesis, whether there was one final redactor or many, the exact dates involved, etc., but all will agree that historical evidence cannot leave the traditional picture intact.

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[6] See BT. *Sanhedrin* 99:a, which establishes that even he who declares that all of the Torah is from heaven, but for one verse that Moses uttered on his own initiative, is to be regarded as denigrating God's word

[7] As he puts it: "the power of these inferences, based on solid argument and internally consistent premises, will not be denied by intellectually honest persons" – see Mordechai Breuer, "The Study of Bible and the Primacy of the Fear of Heaven: Compatibility or Contradiction?" in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, edited by Shalom Carmy (Northvale, N.J.L Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 161

The response of Modern Orthodoxy to such conclusions has been largely to ignore or avoid them. Until fairly recently, most Orthodox scholars involved in the field typically limited their research to lower criticism - investigating issues of textual accuracy or anything having to do more generally with the meaning of specific lexical and other terms as now illuminated by parallel (e.g., Ugaritic or Mesopotamian) texts. As a rule, they avoided higher criticism, which deals with the circumstances of the Torah's composition and the oral and written sources influencing its message.[8]

Beyond the futility of ignoring as a method of resolution, however, the very distinction between "lower" and "higher" is problematic, for where does one draw the line? As biblical scholar, James Kugel, has remarked: [9] "If Ugaritic can be invoked to clarify the phrase *kesef sigim* in Proverbs, then why can't it be used to clarify the meaning of "El Elyon"? How about "love [of God]" in the light of Hittite and Mesopotamian treaty language? Forget about the Documentary Hypothesis; doesn't clarifying lexical items ultimately lead to adopting modern scholars' ideas about the word *ivri* and all it may say about Israelite origins?"

To the extent that Orthodox thinkers have attended at all to the challenges of higher criticism, they have generally adopted a modernist approach[10] associated with the slogan of "*Torah u-madda,*" (Torah and science) which regards both sources of knowledge as valuable avenues to Truth. Such an approach addresses any possible discrepancies between them as localized controversies between science and religion regarding "the facts of the matter". Under such circumstances, the credibility – or, at the very least, compatibility - of the Torah's rendition with the objective standards of reason will always be maintained.

Proponents of this approach often enlist the tools of science itself in order to defend the accuracy of traditional accounts on science's own grounds.[11] Alternatively, difficulties are resolved by appeal to Maimonides'

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[8] Consonant with this policy, the departments of biblical studies at Bar Ilan University and Yeshiva University – to the best of my knowledge – still continue to teach higher criticism only as applied to the Prophets and later works, but not with regard to the five books of Moses. A similar observation can be made with regard to censorship of higher criticism in the dept. of biblical studies at Bar Ilan university, alongside inclusion of a course on Judaism and the challenge of feminism (highlighting the male perspective of Scripture) in their dept. of gender studies.

[9] In personal communication

[10] By "modernist" I refer to a worldview based on the assumption of rigid and stable notions of truth, supported by a universal, neutral and objective rationality that serves as their justification.

[11] The Hungarian-born rabbi and Torah scholar, David Zvi Hoffman, was a prominent initiator of this approach. For more recent examples, see Yaacov Shavit and Mordechai Eran, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn: From Holy Scripture to the Book of Books: A History of Biblical Culture and the Battles over the Bible*

classic statement that "the gates of figurative interpretation" are never "shut in our faces","[12] intimating that whenever the literal meaning of the Torah can be incontrovertibly refuted, this should be taken as clear indication that the text was meant to be understood allegorically, with deeper meanings to be extracted by the more philosophically inclined. Questionable features of biblical morality are resolved in a similarly *ad hoc* manner; drawing upon various apologetic arguments in order to defend their underlying values and conclusions.[13]

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer's understanding of biblical contradictions as planted deliberately by God for educational reasons offers another rather ingenious way to integrate modern biblical scholarship into a classic Torah framework.[14] An equally creative approach is that of Professor David Weiss-Halivni, who suggests that a once perfect Torah was corrupted during a long period of halakhic negligence. Although the Torah itself remained corrupted, the practical consequences of this corruption were corrected through authoritative midrashic interpretation, i.e. the biblical interpretation found in *midrashei halakha*, which succeeded in reinstating the proper halachic norms of the Jewish community.[15] These striking theories are designed to justify traditional Jewish veneration of Torah in light of what, on first blush, appear to be perplexing anomalies in the text.

There is no denying, however, that this entire battery of tactics--which still links the sanctity of the Torah to the authenticity of an original revelatory event at Sinai, and to the unique status of Moses as prophet--quickly loses its persuasiveness when it is realized that the various difficulties it purports to address can be far more simply and elegantly explained by reference to their historical setting and the concomitant development of human understanding.

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in Modern Judaism, translated by Chaya Naor (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), pp, 423-434, under the sub-heading "Orthodox bible criticism in Eretz Israel". Many of these responses rely on the findings of various Jewish biblical scholars such as Moshe Zvi Segal, Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai, Umberto Cassuto and Yehezkel Kaufman who objected to Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis, despite the fact that their conclusions did not necessarily confirm the notion of a one-time revelation to Moses (ibid, pp. 389-395); see also Barukh J. Schwartz, "The Pentateuch as Scripture and the Challenge of Biblical Criticism: Responses among Modern Jewish Thinkers and Scholars", in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: NYU Press, 2012), pp. 203-229; Asaf Yedida, *Bikoret Mevukeret: Alternativot Ortodoxiyot le-"Mada Hayadut"1873-1956* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 2013); Amnon Bazak, *Ad Hayom Hazeh* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013).

[12] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* II, chapter 25

[13] Eliezer Berkovits' distinction between Torah-authentic and Torah-tolerated ideals is one example of this approach – idem, *Jewish Women in Time and Torah* (Hoboken: Ktav 1990)

[14] Mordechai Breuer, "The Study of Bible" (supra, n. 7)

[15] David Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Drash* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 89-154; idem, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997).

Moreover, modern literary theory teaches us that allegory itself is a culture-specific phenomenon, with various factors determining when and where it is to be used.

Nevertheless, the closest that a *Torah u-madda* approach comes to a more naturalistic interpretation (i.e., to an interpretation that relates the difficulties raised by a critical reading of the text to natural causes) is in its willingness to appropriate the notion of divine accommodation [16] – i.e., that God deliberately expressed Godself to Moses in the language of the times. Beyond the theological difficulty entailed in envisioning a God who reacts in anthropomorphic fashion to shifting temporal conditions, the inadequacies of this solution when confronted by discovery of a biblical worldview bearing more pervasive biases (such as those highlighted by feminists) of a dated or parochial nature that are so implicit and subtle that the innocent reader usually remains unaware of their existence (and therefore cannot be taken as serving some accommodative purpose), are not considered. I believe that the shortcomings of current approaches to the notion of Torah from Heaven point to a new theological dimension that should rivet the attention of every traditional Jew. The rising number of scholars and students committed to the Orthodox way of life who are beginning to enter the fray and confront the more formidable challenges raised by contemporary biblical criticism to the very concept of verbal revelation are slowly paving the way for more honest and rigorous exploration of possible responses.[17] In forcing the issue, contemporary scholarship creates one of those decisive historical moments when faith can be lost – or strengthened -- through its refinement. The stakes are very high.

IV – The Linguistic Turn: A New Direction in Religious Thinking

Edward de Bono, a leading authority on creative thinking, states that "asking the right question may be the most important part of thinking."[18] In line with this, I believe that the key to Orthodox resolution of this dilemma involves a radical departure from the modernist "*Torah u-madda*" approach, which relates

[16] For more extensive discussion of this concept, which in a Jewish context represents a radical extension of R. Ishmael's original pronouncement that "the Torah speaks in the language of man" (i.e., that the Torah contains some expressions and literary flourishes that should be understood as colloquialisms and taken at face value), see: Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany 1993)

[17] For one of the most recent efforts, see www.thetorah.com, a site which attempts to integrate traditional Torah study with the findings of biblical scholarship.

[18] http://questioningteachers.wordpress.com/discussion-reflection-and-resources/quotes-about-questions/general-quotes/

to all truth claims of religion cognitively, as simple statements of fact. I submit that this approach has reached a dead end. Instead, I advocate replacing it with a broader appreciation of the function of religious language in its anthropological context.[19] In other words, instead of questioning whether the doctrine of Torah from Heaven is true empirically, Orthodox believers must rather ask: what is its function in the context of their religious lives. Is its primary concern to discuss history or to fulfill purposes of another sort?

In making this methodological point, I am aligning with a more general phenomenon, known as the "linguistic turn", which has come to characterize a revolutionary change of focus in contemporary philosophy at large. The impetus for this change was inspired mainly by the thought of the Austrian-born philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and encapsulated in his seminal observation that all philosophical problems are the product of a confused use of language (see excursus). Philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, arise only when we make some systemic linguistic error. Once it becomes clear that the difficulty is essentially grammatical and not a real question about "the way things are", the problem itself dissolves.[20]

Although Wittgenstein himself did not write anything systematic or detailed regarding the philosophy of religion, many features of his views of language have proven very suggestive for thinking about religion in ways that are quite different than what has traditionally been done. Indeed, it is largely as a result of Wittgenstein's influence that theological efforts in the past few decades have turned away from the by-now overworked modernist attempts to try and defend religion's portrayal of reality on an empiric level.

With respect to Christianity where clearly defined doctrine plays a central role, the influence of a cognitively muted view of religion has been embraced more enthusiastically by sociologists than by theologians, while many of the latter still object vigorously to banishing religious dogma from the arena of truth and falsehood. To the extent that Judaism is a religion in

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[19] For a similar emphasis on language as the key factor in finding a solution, see Rabbi Amit Kula, *Existential or Non-Essential: History and Literature*, *Religious Language and the Nature of the Deity* (Kibbutz HaDati, 2011) [Hebrew]; Brian Klug, "Grammar from Heaven: The Language of Revelation in Light of Wittgenstein", http://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/2013/06/grammar-from-heaven/ and the related interview with him in: http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/prof-brian-klug-on-revelation-and-torah-from-heaven/; Jeremy Rosen, "Torah Mi-Sinai and Biblical Criticism", http://thetorah.com/torah-misinai-and-biblical-criticism/, as well as Marc Brettler's article in this volume.

[20] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [3rd edition], translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company. 1953/1968), paragraphs 114-133

which doctrine is more clearly related to practice, a non-cognitive approach appears to bear greater promise for justifying beliefs that cannot be corroborated by the evidence of rational inquiry. Here too, however, we would do well to consider how far the flight from literal truth claims can be taken in supporting the traditional Jewish belief in a divinely revealed Torah. How is it to be negotiated and what are its implications for Jewish theology at large. It is here that the work of biblical scholars, historians and scientists ends, and the work of philosophers and theologians begins.[21]

V – Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Questioning the Centrality of Empirical Data

Some initial attempts at divergence from a strictly cognitive response to the theological dilemmas of Modern Orthodoxy – relating to religious dogma as transmitting something other than empirical data - can be discerned in interest on the part of several Orthodox academicians in problematizing over-rigid definitions of Jewish doctrine. [22] Nevertheless, the traditional belief in Torah from Heaven bears a unique status even in this context,.

Even when seeking nuance in traditional understandings of Maimonides' eighth principle of faith, Orthodox thinkers have until very recently refrained from alluding to the traditional account of the giving of the Torah as anything other than a factual description.[23] Any direct questioning of the historical accuracy of this account or even detailed scrutiny as to what exactly it entails is regarded amongst Orthodox Jews as a serious breach of religious etiquette, on the presumption that such discussion involves a weakening of the Torah's binding nature. This taboo is only now beginning to erode.

A few theologians and scholars in the Modern Orthodox camp seem to reject empiric data as the exclusive criterion for establishing the revelatory

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[21] This, of course, does not mean to suggest that the two are mutually exclusive. Indeed, many religiously committed bible scholars do feel impelled to engage in philosophical, epistemological and theological questions, at least on a personal level.

[22] See, for example, Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman, 2004); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything* (Oxford: Littman, 2006); Howard Wettstein, "Doctrine", in *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 14:4 (October 1997), pp. 423-443.

[23] See, for example, Eliezer Berkovits' "What is Jewish Philosophy?" in *Tradition*, vol.3:2 (Spring 1961), pp. 117-130, where he asserts that the Torah, as the word of God, is "a fact, a historic event that happened between God and Israel" (p. 121). Since the revelation at Sinai "occurred in history at a definite moment and at a definite place", the Torah - along with God and Israel – is one of three "events" constituting the constants of Jewish belief (ibid).

status of the Bible.[24] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the revered leader of American Modern Orthodoxy, might be construed as taking a first step in this direction. In a notable passage from "The Lonely Man of Faith", he states:

> I have never been seriously troubled by the problem of the Biblical doctrine of creation vis-a-vis the scientific story of evolution at both the cosmic and the organic levels, nor have I been perturbed by the confrontation of the mechanistic interpretation of the human mind with the Biblical spiritual concept of man. I have not been perplexed by the impossibility of fitting the mystery of revelation into the framework of historical empiricism. Moreover, I have not even been troubled by the theories of Biblical criticism which contradict the very foundations upon which the sanctity and integrity of the Scriptures rest. However, while theoretical oppositions and dichotomies have never tormented my thoughts, I could not shake off the disquieting feeling that the practical role of the man of faith within modern society is a very difficult, indeed, a paradoxical one….
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> We all know that the Bible offers two accounts of the creation of man. We are also aware of the theory suggested by Bible critics attributing these two accounts to two different traditions and sources. Of course, since we do unreservedly accept the unity and integrity of the Scriptures and their divine character, we reject this hypothesis which is based, like much Biblical criticism, on literary categories invented by modern

[24] Such rejection is not to be equated with recent willingness on the part of a few Orthodox thinkers to push the envelope of non-Mosaic authorship to its limits. These thinkers cite various Talmudic and medieval sources that already allowed for the possibility of later interpolations to the original Torah text, while generally acknowledging a qualitative difference between such isolated cases and the conclusions of more radical source theory. See, for example, Rabbi Yuval Cherlow's piece on TheTorah.com, http://thetorah.com/rabbi-cherlow-authorship-torah/ as well as the essay by Prof. Israel Knohl (written in his pre-academic days): http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/deot/kanohel.htm. See also Prof. Marc Shapiro's essay on the Seforim blog, http://seforim.blogspot.co.il/2013/03/torah-mi-sinai-and-more.html, analyzing the position of Cherlow, Knohl and others who concede the dispensability of Mosaic authorship on the basis of such precedents, so long as the more extended interpolations may also be regarded as prophetically inspired or formally incorporated into the canon by the Talmudic Sages). The deviations from cognitivism raised in this section, by contrast, do not refer to any particular type of rational argumernt but rather to a variety of religious existentialist positions in tune with the earlier Wittgenstein's distinction (see excursus) between cognitive ("meaningful") and non-cognitive ("nonsensical") propositions, which justifies the latter as pointers to ineffable truths that cannot be validated empirically.

> man, ignoring completely the eidetic-noetic content of the Biblical story. It is, of course, true that the two accounts of the creation of man differ considerably. This incongruity was not discovered by the Bible critics. Our sages of old were aware of it. However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man.[25]

R. Soloveitchik's remarks in this passage focus primarily on the contradiction between the two accounts of Adam in Genesis. Nevertheless, R. Soloveitchik makes tantalizing references, in passing, to the disparity between the traditional account of the "mystery of revelation" and the "framework of historical empiricism", and to the "theories of Biblical criticism which contradict the very foundations upon which the sanctity and integrity of the Scriptures rest". This juxtaposition raises the question: would R. Soloveitchik have parted company with R. Breuer's fundamentalism on this point, [26] and considered it legitimate to validate not only the contradiction between Adam I and Adam II, but even a problematizing of the traditional account of a one-time revelation to Moses, on existentialist grounds alone? Could R. Soloveitchik have accepted, for example, scholarly assumptions regarding the role of a final redactor, while simultaneously postulating "the unity and integrity of the Scriptures and their divine character"? Although the thrust of his argument makes this theoretically possible, such a conclusion is not at all clear, and - given his general religious orientation – highly unlikely.

In the end, we must admit that R. Soloveitchik offers us no real explanation for his lack of perplexity regarding what he obviously recognizes as a dilemma and "impossibility".[27] What is clear, however, is that

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[25] J.B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith", edited by David Shatz (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 10.

[26] Breuer – like Soloveitchik in this passage – was aware of the findings of source criticism and even developed a full-blown theory for explaining them as the divine method for conveying timeless existential truths in a dialectical manner. He, however, insisted upon basing the authority of the Torah on the *fact* that the Mosaic prophecy was unique in its level of reliability.

[27] Alan Brill, on his blogsite: The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality (http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2012/08/16/rav-soloveitchik-religious-definitions-of-man-and-his-social-institutions-1959-part-4-of-7) transcribes the relevant section of an earlier lecture of Soloveitchik which he regards as "the emergence, if not the origin" of "The Lonely Man of Faith" essay. In this lecture, Soloveitchik refers to Umberto Cassuto, stating:

> "As you know, Bible critics already pointed out these two accounts as differing. The Bible critics always claim two sources. The Bible critics, they make one mistake: they don't try to solve the problem philosophically. [Umberto] Casutto says they substituted source criticism for

Soloveitchik's existentialist bent does not prevent him from basing religious commitment on claims of correspondence between religious truths and *some* objective ontology.[28] Subjective certainty provides – to Soloveitchik's mind – the basic starting point for the inner experience of the believer. [29] When this experience is transposed into practice in accordance with the abstract categories of halakha (which he understands to be the embodiment of ideal a priori values and principles, that transcend the historic, ideological, or moral interpretations that have accrued to them), however, Soloveitchik regards the end result as a reliable guide to an existing metaphysical reality which these categories are meant to realize.[30] Nevertheless, what is significant for our purposes is his willingness to distinguish between cognitive and non-cognitive statements in principle, and to justify even the latter as pointers to ineffable truths, despite the fact that they cannot be validated empirically.

VI - Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Torah from Sinai as a Normative Statement

A far more radical break with cognitive truth as a criterion for establishing the divinity of the Torah is exhibited in the thought of Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz.[31] During my student days, Leibowitz was famous for his thundering pronouncements in public lectures that "the Torah is not a HISTORY book, nor is it a textbook in PHYSICS!" By this he meant to emphasize the sharp distinction between historic or scientific statements on the one hand, and statements of value ("religious facts") which cannot be verified or refuted empirically on the other. Leibowitz, to the best of my

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> philosophic ideas. [AB- Cassuto, Genesis, before the second account of creation.] I tell you this not because I am a rabbi and am dedicated to this text, and not because of fundamentalism. I like to understand the text. Even if you want to accept the Bible critics… I am not interested in the source, [but] rather the literary structure for the two accounts. The story is not something arbitrary. The story of bringing Eve was intended to show that one account is not sufficient. The two theses are contradictory and Judaism accepts both: man created alone and together. There are two theories about society: the individual and the communal, Robinson Crusoe and the Hegel corporal state."

Although this transcription is interesting, Soloveitchik's actual opinion regarding the literary origins of the two conflicting accounts remains unresolved.

[28] In this Soloveitchik differs even from the earlier Wittgensteinian position. For a current application of Soloveitchik's approach, see Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky's blog post, "I have not been troubled by them," on Morethodoxy, http://morethodoxy.org/2013/08/09/i-have-not-been-troubled-by-them-another-angle-on-the-question-de-jure-by-yosef-kanefsky/.

[29] See, for example, Joseph Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, "U-vikashtem mi-sham", *Ish ha-Halakhah – Galui ve Nistar* (Jerusalem: Dept. of Religious Culture and Education for the Golah, 1979), pp. 127-137.

[30] See, his essay, "Halakhic Man", in *Ish ha-Halakha*, pp. 56-59.

[31] For broader discussion of similarities and differences between Soloveitchik's and Leibowitz's approach to Scripture, see Avi Sagi, "Contending with Modernity: Scripture in the Thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Joseph Soloveitchik", *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 77:3 (July 1997), pp. 421-441.

knowledge, never offered any straightforward, unequivocal statement as to whether he believed the biblical account of the Sinai event had any historical grounding.[32] What he certainly did assert, however, even more emphatically than Soloveitchik, was that this question was totally meaningless in a religious context and irrelevant in establishing the sanctified status of the Torah.

As opposed to Soloveitchik, Leibowitz did not see the Torah as "speaking for itself."[33] Neither its timeless existential message, nor the accuracy of its description of the circumstances surrounding its transmission, grants the Torah its sanctity but rather the practical role assigned to it by historical Judaism. Rather than teach us about a past event in which God spoke to Moses, or convey any current sense of His presence seeping through the text, the proposition that "God gave the Torah" is a normative statement that comes to express recognition of our obligation to assume the yoke of the Torah and its commandments. Thus, instead of revelation providing the basis for a particular way of life, it is this way of life, and – more specifically – the particular mindset reflected in the halakhic tradition of the Oral Law, which grants the Torah its revelatory status as the word of God and establishes its prescriptions as binding.[34]

Although a scientist mistrustful of supernaturalism, Leibowitz was a deeply religious person who would vociferously object to the contention that religion has no ontological grounding. Leibowitz's reservations regarding a literal understanding of religious propositions – unlike those of Mordechai Kaplan – do not stem from a full-fledged flight from metaphysics, but rather

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[32] See below, n.37

[33] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Faith, Religion and Science" (Heb.), in *Yahadut, Am Yehudi u-Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), p. 347.

[34] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, ibid, pp. 348-350. For further exposition of this position, see Avi Sagi: Leibowitz, "A Breakthrough in Jewish Philosophy: Religion without Metaphysics", *Religious Studies 33* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.203-216. See also Gilad Bareli's formulation in his essay: "Faith and Mitzvot: 'The Content contains no more than what is embodied in its shell': Leibowitz's and Witgenstein's content-laden shells" (Hebrew), in *Y. Leibowitz: Bein Shamranut le-Radicaliyyut-Diyunim beMishnato*, ed A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem, Van Leer/Hakibbutz ha-Meuhad, 2007), pp. 275-276: "On the one hand the religious Jew accepts the *mitzvot* as the *mitzvot o*f God and accepts the yoke of the Torah as the word of God. On the other hand, he knows that these *mitzvot* and this word are human creations set down at a certain place and time. Is this not a contradiction?… [No.] The "word of God" does not point to a fact; it points to a special category of awareness on the part of the believer. To see a certain matter as the word of God is to maintain that it possesses a special status in the consciousness of the believer … in terms of his attitude to the world and to humanity and to fashioning his mode of life" (trans. Lawrence Kaplan, on Allan Brill's blogsite, Feb. 11th, 2003; http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/conversation-with-james-kugel-a-follow-up/#comment-7550).

from a Kantian-like objection to applying human categories to an absolutely transcendent God, ascribing this view to Maimonides as well. However, Leibowitz's affinity for Kantian thought and its distinction betweem the noumenal ("the thing as it is in itself") and the phenomenal (the world of appearances), leads him to take the argument for transcendence further than Maimonides and to claim – like Kant and unlike Maimonides – that our approach to God can be conducted not by means of the intellect, but only via the volitional channel of morals and values. This is because hypothezing the existence of a metaphysical source is the only explanation possible for the human sense of moral obligation. Thus, Leibowitz grounds the ultimate authority of the Torah as God's word exclusively on the voluntary decision of the rabbinic Sages to accept it as such, rather than on any objective historical occurrence.[35]

Because God's absolute transcendence precludes any revelation of His self in the world, undertaking the performance of mitzvot for its own sake without any thought of attunement to human needs is the only way of relating to a Being who is by definition inscrutable and totally "Other".[36] In Leibowitz's eyes, accepting the Torah as God's word mandates engaging the

35 The degree of reliability Leibowitz attached to the biblical account of the Sinai event, beyond its theocentric import, is not clear. According to Yaakov Levinger's testimony, as reported by Avi Sagi in "Dat le-lo Metaphysica? Bein Leibowitz le-Wittgenstein", in *Mahshavot* 67, April 1995, p. 9 (Hebrew), Leibowitz's somewhat circumspect response to that question was that if the significance of the Sinai revelation lay in the event itself, it failed. Biblical history teaches that there is no correlation between God's revelation and intervention in Jewish history affairs on one hand and the willingness of the Jewish people to believe in and worship God on the other. Yaacov Shavit and Mordechai Eran (see *The Hebrew Bible Reborn: From Holy Scripture to the Book of Books*, p. 433), however, suggest that "it would be a mistake to think that Leibowitz ascribed no value to the veracity of the historical description in the Bible… in particular formative events such as the Exodus from Egypt and the theophany on Mt. Sinai… His writings show that he also considered these as historical events not only because the Oral Law views them as such, but also because their veracity is self-evident." Barring the unlikely possibility that Leibowitz couched his language esoterically when necessitated by the nature of his audience (similar to the policy attributed by Leo Strauss to Maimonides), this suggestion appears to be corroborated by Leibowitz's a-historical attitude regarding some laws of biblical origin (see Tamar Ross, "The Status of Woman in Judaism: Several Reservations Regarding the Stance of Leibowitz" [Hebrew], in *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Olamo ve-Haguoto*, edited by Avi Sagi [Jerusalem: Keter, 1995], pp. 151). It is further corroborated by his dismissive remarks regarding "heretical scientific and pseudo-scientific biblical research, better known as 'biblical criticism', when considering suggestions of post-Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy (see his *Sheva Shanim shel Sikhot al Parshat ha-Shavua – 1976-1983*, edited by Mira Ofran [Jerusalem: Dvus Hemed, 2003], pp. 827-828). These examples, as others, indicate that Leibowitz's naturalistic view of revelation is more accurately attributed to his affinity with Maimonidian theology (see *Guide of the Perplexed*, II,32), according to which prophecy reflects some genuine, man-initiated absorption of the eternal divine effluence, than to the influence of modern biblical scholarship and its critical methods.

36 It is this insistence upon God's utter "Otherness" that leads to Leibowitz's radical emphasis upon theocentrism – i.e., that all religious worship must be conducted "*lishmah*" (for its own sake, without any ulterior motive). Any introduction of human considerations is a form of idolatry, in Leibowitz's view, reducing God to the image of man by applying categories drawn from human experience to the divine.

Torah in an interpretive project. The objective of such a project is to translate the ostensibly supernatural connotations of its mythological language, which speaks of God's revelation and intervention in worldly affairs, into terms that are theologically compatible with this Kantian constraint – i.e., as bearing a normative thrust, rather than conveying any informative content.

Leibowitz's rule of thumb for demythologizing the language of the Torah[37] is to translate the statements in which God is the subject into statements where the individual is the subject and God is the object. His treatment of the opening verse of Genesis is an illustrative example of this approach. According to Leibowitz, the statement that "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" makes no sense theologically (as God is above time) nor empirically (because these words correspond to nothing in our natural experience). Therefore, Leibowitz re-interprets this statement as coming to teach us a religious lesson: "What I [Leibowitz] learn from this verse is the great principle of faith, that the world is not God – the negation of atheism and pantheism".[38] So, too, the proposition "God gave the Torah", which is similarly unintelligible both theologically and empirically, is now understood not as a "religious fact", but as "the obligation compelling the individual to worship God."[39]

VII - In the Footsteps of Leibowitz: Kasher, Levinger, Goldman and Schwartz

The appeal of Leibowitz's voluntaristic approach to the biblical text as sanctified merely on strength of human fiat is evident in the writings of a few younger colleagues or disciples, such as Israeli philosophers Asa Kasher, Yaakov Levinger, and Eliezer Goldman, who were affected by his thought and engaged him in continuing dialogue. Indeed, a radical aversion to metaphysical claims serves as the linchpin of Goldman's comprehensive program for "religion without illusions." Goldman re-iterates views similar to those of Leibowitz regarding the unbridgeable chasm between man and a

[37] As aptly formulated by Sagi, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz – A Breakthrough in Jewish Philosophy," (ibid) , p. 213.

[38] Taken from a lecture of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Religion and Science", that was translated into English, , in *Judaism, Human Values, and the State of Israel*, edited and translated by Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 140. For a similar formulation, see: Leibowitz, "Faith, Religion and Science", pp. 340-341

[39] Sagi, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz – A Breakthrough in Jewish Philosophy," (ibid) , p. 213. Does Leibowitz claim that the mythic statements of the Torah were formulated at the outset with this anti-metaphysical meaning in mind? To the best of my knowledge, Leibowitz evinced no interest in this question.

transcendent God, and replicates the latter's resistance to grounding religious obligation on claims that draw upon empiric evidence or anthropological interests - albeit in somewhat milder form.[40]

Some contemporary biblical scholars, whose research precludes relating to traditional accounts of the origins of the biblical text as factual descriptions, appear to share Leibowitz's predilection for a naturalistic view of revelation as well. For these individuals, all of whom are personally committed to an Orthodox way of life, belief in the divinity of the Torah might amount to no more than affirmation of the Rabbinic understanding that the proper way to approach God is by submitting to Scripture's commands, as defined by the Oral Law. Whether any one verse or the Torah as a whole was literally dictated by God to Moses is a minor issue for one who accepts this basic message.

A notable representative of this approach is Barukh Schwartz. In his opinion, what is most important to the religious life is recognition of the primacy of divine command. In the wake of Leibowitz, he too believes that this entails commitment to abide by the constitutive guidelines of the halakhic tradition and to submit to its internal authority, even when this mandates over-riding contrary humanistic considerations. [41]

VIII – Shortcomings of metaphysical minimalism (James Kugel)

[40] As opposed to Leibowitz's extreme theocentricim, Goldman is prepared to relegate some role to human experience in the religious life. This is exhibited firstly in his willingness to grant believers the right to attribute reasons for various *mitzvot*, even though such speculations bear no influence on their formal status as binding – see E. Goldman, "Scientific statements and religious statements", *Mehkarim ve-Iyunim: Hagut Yehudit be-avar uba-hoveh*, edited by Danny Statman and Avi Sagi, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), p. 344. Secondly, Goldman sees in the very observance of *mitzvot* expression of man's belief that in the performance of such acts he is indeed worshipping God. What this means, in effect, is that the *experience* of God's presence itself, and not merely the decision to seek it, is created from within and by means of religious practice, thereby reinforcing conviction of our ability to engage with an existing metaphysical reality. The strength of this conviction stands in direct proportion to the ability of the community of believers to find experiential value in their religious practice, while constantly refraining from inappropriate metaphysical conclusions. – idem, *Yahadut lelo Ashlaya*, edited by Danny Statman and Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Machon Hartman/Keter, 2009), chapters 4-5, pp. 366-368.

[41] See Barukh Yaakov Schwartz, "Matan Torah: The Contribution of Biblical Scholarship to an Understanding of this Concept in the Past and Present" (Heb.), *Mahshevet Yisrael vi-Emunat Yisrael*, edited by Daniel Lasker (Beersheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2012), pp. 30-31, suggesting that belief in the Sinaitic revelation is a by-product rather than basis for commitment to the halakhic way of life.. See also Perry Dane, "The Yoke of Heaven, the Question of Sinai, and the Life of Law", *44 University of Toronto Law Journal*, 353, 1994, pp. 353-400, where he argues that belief or disbelief in a literal revelation at Sinai is neither necessary nor sufficient to either accepting or rejecting traditional halakhic commitment. Dane's claim can be understood as another example of interest in divorcing the authority of halakhic demands from claims for supernatural intervention in human affairs.

Beyond this small circle of intellectuals, however, Leibowitz's metaphysically muted approach has not succeeded in captivating the minds and hearts of most rank and file believers. This has partially to do with his terse, polemical language and propensity for stark, paradoxical aphorisms that turn conventional views on their head without cushioning the blow. But aside from matters of style, this failure also boils down to the fact that a theology which grounds the divinity of the Torah merely on the voluntary decision of the Rabbis leaves many religious believers cold.

Deciding that one is obliged to serve God via the Rabbinic interpretation of the Torah simply because that is what the Rabbis decided adds up – after all is said and done – to no more than formalistic double-talk, or a tautology. To put the objection another way, if Leibowitz is not prepared to allow for any revelation of God's will on theological principle, why should rabbinic fiat be granted any privilege in determining the divine nature and meaning of Torah?[42]

A sense of the inadequacy of Leibowitz's theological position can be discerned even amongst some contemporary Orthodox scholars who appear at first blush very close to his view of religion as man-made. While concurring with the suggestion that the sanctity of the Torah derives primarily from the decision of the Talmudic Rabbis to view it as such, rather than anything inherent in the text or in the circumstances of its transmission, most of these individuals are nevertheless not satisfied to leave things at that.

A notable example is the biblical scholar, James Kugel. Although unencumbered by Leibowitz's philosophical baggage regarding God's utter transcendence, Kugel's scholarship on the transformation of the Bible into Scripture similarly precludes relating to traditional accounts of revelation as strictly factual descriptions. This leads Kugel– like Leibowitz – to view the Bible primarily as a by-product of Israel's acceptance of "the supreme mission of serving God" and the fleshing out of this obligation via its interpretation.[43] Nevertheless, in expanding upon this notion (in a theological epilogue to what is essentially a scientific work tracking the evolution of the earliest

[42] For one pungent version of this critique, see Daniel Statman, "Negative Theology and the Meaning of the Commandments in Modern Orthodoxy", *Tradition* 39:1 (2005), pp. 64-66.

[43] James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), pp. 684-685. In this connection, it is interesting to note a co-incidental similarity between Kugel (http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/conversation-with-james-kugel-about-revelation) and Leibowitz (*Yahadut,Am Yehudi, u-Medinat Yisrael*, ibid, p. 349), when both invoke halakhic determination of the Jewish calendar as illustration of the supremacy of Rabbinic fiat in determining the status and meaning of Scripture.

biblical sources into sacred Scripture as we know it today), Kugel continues as follows:

> Divine inspiration is not, at the bottom, a matter of conferring a seal of divine approval on this or that passage of Scripture, or on Scripture as a whole…Rather, as some rabbinic texts themselves intimate, it has all to do with the great, single revelation that inaugurated (and on which was predicated) Israel's changed perception of God. Scripture reflects the real moment in the history of the human apprehension of the divine that occurred back in biblical times…the moment when Israel first stood before God as His familiar servants, eager to carry out His will in myriad particulars.[44]

When referring to "the great, single revelation that inaugurated (and on which was predicated) Israel's changed perception of God", Kugel's phraseology leaves us guessing: is he making a metaphysical statement about God's activities or referring solely to what he himself terms a "human apprehension of the divine?" But Kugel then goes on to say: "While I could not be involved in a religion that was entirely a human artifact**,** it would, in theory at least, be enough for me if God said what He is reported to have said in Exodus and Deuteronomy: "Do you want to come close to Me? Then do My bidding, become My employees."[45]

Here it would seem that despite the formal authority of the Rabbis, Kugel is indicating [46] that some appeal to the supernatural that extends beyond human initiative is still required in order to render compelling the Rabbinic interpretation of the biblical text, and their fleshing out of this interpretation in a myriad of legal particulars. In other words, divine revelation must refer to "some objective occurrence in the real world".[47]

For all his awareness of the decidedly human character of the biblical text, an entirely man-made religion is not for him. Kugel carefully avoids

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[44] *How to Read the Bible* (ibid), p. 687
[45] *How to Read the Bible* (ibid), p. 689
[46] This is in contrast to Leibowitz's assertion – a la David Hume - that an "is" never leads to an "ought", and that biblical historiography teaches us that it was precisely those generations that were far removed from prophecy and the miraculous events at Sinai who ensured the continuity of Judaism. See: Avi Sagi, "Dat le-lo Metaphysica, *Mahshavot* (ibid), p. 9. See also Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Sheva Shanim*, pp. 267-268.
[47] As relayed in a group discussion at the Yarnton center for Judaic and Hebrew Studies on May 28th, 2013 devoted to the topic.

offering neat definitions of what the original divine message consisted of and when and where it took place, but does not take issue with the doctrine of *Torah mi-Sinai* to the extent that it refers to an original revelation that was once addressed to a particular person(s?) at a particular time. He rejects viewing the contents of that revelation as merely "a human reaction to the ineffable divine", insisting that the idea that "God can communicate with human beings" is indispensable to Judaism.[48]

Another ostensible shortcoming of Leibowitz's approach is that his narrow view of the biblical message diminishes its significance in religious life. Can the total import of the Torah be reduced to normative statements regarding the obligation to serve God through God's commandments? Surely generations of believers have found greater meaning in the Torah than this! [49] This aspect of Leibowitz's thought might be viewed as philosophic expression of the need of contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy to define its religious world in terms of accepting the yoke of mitzvot as compensation for loss of the palpable sense of God's immediate presence which typified pre-modern believers.[51] (Ironically, the criticism of diminishing the biblical message has been leveled even more sharply against what has been termed Kugel's "excavational" approach to the study of biblical texts. Kugel, unlike Leibowitz, is not involved in any systematic project of re-interpretation of the biblical text itself. This has led some of Kugel's protagonists to fault him for relating to its original contents as outdated Iron Age fragments, devoid of intrinsic merit, which became sanctified only by virtue of their subsequent canonization and interpretation).[52]

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[48] http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/conversation-with-james-kugel-about-revelation/

[49] For application of this criticism to both Leibowitz and Soloveitchik – viewing each as limited in their attempt to understand the entire meaning of Scripture in accordance with one exclusive (normative or existential, respectively) hermeneutic principle, see Avi Sagi, "Contending with Modernity", pp. 437-440.

[51] See Danny Statman, "Negative Theology", pp. 55-68.

[52] See Alan Brill's blog http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2010/04/01/critique-of-kugel-1/ , where he sardonically notes: "Acceptance of revelation is not pixie dust to magically wave over a human document…. One cannot treat the Bible simply as primitive and then call it revelation" See also Benjamin Sommers, "Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 100, no. 1 (winter 2010), pp. 153-182. With regard to Kugel, I believe this criticism is somewhat misplaced. (1) The major theological thrust of Kugel;s scholarly endeavors is that the sanctity of the Torah in Judaism was not determined by a Protestant-like faith in *Sola Scriptura* but on strength of the ongoing internal interpretive tradition that it evoked. It is precisely this understanding that leads Kugel to reject an "excavationalist" approach, irrespective of its academic merits, as totally irrelevant *in a religious setting*. (2) Despite his emphasis on the critical role of subsequent interpretive layers in hallowing earlier biblical fragments, Kugel's reverence for such core texts does not rely on these later developments alone. Alongside traces of pagan influence and a primitive mindset, he finds elements of biblical narrative (such as depictions of Abraham's and Jacob's confusion between men and angels), and other testimonies to fleeting experiences of the

On first blush, one might argue that the reservations expressed by biblical scholars such as Kugel regarding Leibowitz's metaphysical modesty in grounding the divinity of Torah is merely another variation on the debate between the Buberian understanding of revelation as inspiration and Kaplan's naturalistic approach. Kugel's stance is particularly reminiscent of Franz Rosenzweig, who regards a sense of commandedness as the main feature characterizing the revelatory experience, and all the rest as interpretation.

There is no denying that there are grave philosophical difficulties in claiming that the voice of a transcendent God erupted into the natural world. Any such claim would render the hearing of such a voice an empirical observation, independent of how it is represented in the human mind.[53]

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sublime even before the "great Interpretive Revolution" (as he terms it) that he attributes to the closing centuries BCE. In his opinion, these can offer spiritual inspiration for our day, even when taken on their own.

Nevertheless, Kugel's religious privileging of the text as viewed through the lenses of tradition does lead him to be dismissive of some more contemporary methods of textual analysis embraced by Modern Orthodox defenders of the faith as tools for demonstrating the spiritual superiority of the biblical text as it stands. Literary approaches which regard only the final form of the Torah as their object of study are increasingly adopted by religious believers, on the assumption that focusing on the text itself, rather than on its historical components, or the varying political circumstances that these reflect, leads to deeper appreciation of its moral and theological messages – see, for example, R. Aaron Lichtenstein, "Criticism and *Kitvei ha-Kodesh",* in: *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy by friends and students in celebration of forty years of teaching*, edited by Hayyim Angel and Yitzhak Blau [Jersey City: Ktav, 2012], pp. 15-32. In their opinion, even if a holistic approach to the text does not compel any conclusions regarding its divine source, it at the very least enables an interpretative framework that draws attention to suggestive patterns lurking behind the surface that might yield important religious and psychological insights. On their account, Kugel's prejudice against the notion of a final redactor in his reconstruction of the process whereby the Bible was transformed into Scripture does indeed cause him to overlook important intra-textual nuances, and the lofty messages that can be derived from these. Kugel's dichotomous approach to the methods of secular biblical scholarship versus Torah study conducted through the interpretive lens of rabbinic tradition leads him to be even more emphatically critical of recent work conducted under the rubric of biblical theology. Unlike studies employing a literary approach, the latter do not reject assumptions regarding the text's multiple layers and the varying political/historical circumstances and interests that these reflect, but purport to extract redeeming moral and spiritual lessons even from these – an effort that Kugel sarcastically describes as "having your Bible and criticizing it too". Kugel views both efforts as questionable samples of Western eisegesis, often made possible only through selective use of the evidence, however sophisticatedly masked (see his response to Sommers' "Two Introductions to Scripture" [ibid], entitled "Kugel in JQR", http://www.jameskugel.com/kugel-jqr.pdf). Taken as such, Kugel might regard continued attempts on the part of believers to discover meanings that extend beyond those established by the rabbinic tradition as greater testimony to the ingenuity and creativity of the human spirit than to any biblical (or divine) intent of authentic religious significance, despite the apologetic "feel good" use to which these efforts are put.

[53] It is instructive in this connection to note the declaration of Charles Bradlaugh, one of the notable expositors of atheism in the 19th century, that "the word God is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation." For this reason he refused to deny the idea God, and regarded the question of His existence as non-empirical, or – as he phrased it elsewhere: "…I cannot deny that which presents to me no distinct affirmation, and of which the would-be affirmer has no conception. I cannot war war with a nonentity." In continuation, Bradlaugh makes a further philosophical point, when adding: "If, however, God is affirmed to represent an existence which is distinct from the existence of which I am a mode, and which it is alleged is not the noumenon of which the word 'I' represents only a speciality of

Kugel is not oblivious to this obstacle. He acknowledges that ascribing divine origin to even the most minimal message is, in the last resort, an act of faith and not subject to proof. As he puts it: "words are words are words" and "who are we to determine what or how God can put in His book, or how it can arrive in our hands?" [54] Perhaps for this reason he places far greater importance on the rabbinic understanding that all subsequent interpretations of God's original missive are also encapsulated within it.

As for fallible aspects of this missive (elementary mistakes in physics, biology or history), Kugel attributes these, in a fashion somewhat reminiscent of Maimonides' view of prophecy, to disparity between the original divine "handoff" and the ultimate form it takes upon reception. Likening human apprehension of divine revelation to the human faculty of sight, whereby different wavelengths of light reflected off objects are converted in our brains into different colors, he declares:

> "We simply don't know the beginning of the process we call prophecy – i.e., God speaking to a human being. All we know is what comes out the other end, after the intervention of a human brain".[55]

Nevertheless, reducing the scope of the problem simply by transferring the bulk of God's message to rabbinic extrapolation and relegating the rest to faith does not overcome the problem in principle or abolish it. Neither does distinguishing between an amorphous "divine original" and its human depiction.

Epistemological thinking (i.e., thought pertaining to the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge) has not stood still since the time of Maimonides. There is a difference between medieval talk of God as a metaphysical factor which limited intelligences are incapable of grasping fully, and its amalgamation in Leibowitz's thought with a version of Kantian skepticism that dismisses the possibility of speaking empirically of anything beyond the natural world. Such skepticism is based on what Kant described as his Copernican revolution in the theory of knowledge – i.e., the trading of the medieval notion that man's perceptions revolve around some fixed

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phenomena, then I deny 'God', and affirm that it is impossible 'God' can be." See: http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/bradlaugh.htm

[54] http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/conversation-with-james-kugel-about-revelation/

[55] http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/conversation-with-james-kugel-a-follow-up/

reality, for the modern notion that this reality, far from being fixed, is filtered and shaped by the mind perceiving it.

This raises the question: can ascription of intentionality or deliberate communication to something transcending human experience (even when relegated to the realm of belief) ever be classified as reference to "an objective occurrence", distinct from its representation in the human mind? Surely the very decision that *any* words, rather than others, stem directly from God and bear prophetic status is of necessity dependent upon human interpretation and cultural preconditioning.

IX – Myth of Origin and Narrative Theology (Norman Solomon)

A more recent version of revelatory minimalism that might address these concerns while avoiding the drawbacks of Leibowitz's position is the recommendation of Jewish Studies scholar, Norman Solomon, in a book appropriately entitled "Torah from Heaven." Solomon recommends that the logical status of this doctrine be changed from historical truth to a foundational myth of origin.[56]

While Solomon's academic orientation is more theological and philosophical, his approach to the biblical text – like that of Kugel[57] - does not stem from any reliance on Leibowitz's radically absolutist view of God's transcendence, which are still Kantian in essence.[59] But in addition to the weight of biblical criticism and historical scholarship, Solomon's appeal to myth can also be attributed to the influence of post analytic philosophy of the Wittgenstinian variety and its insights regarding the function of religious language.[60] It is arguably this background that induces Solomon to grab the problematic aspect of Torah from Heaven's metaphysical claims more directly by the horns, when he confesses:

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[56] Norman Solomon, *Torah from Heaven: The Reconstruction of Faith* (Oxford/Portland, Oregon: Littman, 2012), pp. 320-321, 346. For a similar view, using Maurice Halbwach's and Jan Assmann's concept of mnemo-history, see Zev Farber's essay, "Avraham Avinu is my Father: Thoughts on Torah, History and Judaism," on TheTorah.com (http://thetorah.com/torah-history-judaism-introduction/).

[57] And unlike that of Barukh Schwartz, despite the fact that Schwartz , like Kugel and Solomon, views the biblical account of the revelation at Sinai as an etiological myth – see Schwartz, "Matan Torah".

[59] Indeed, in Solomon's survey of the various methods employed by contemporary theologians to reconcile belief in the divinity of the Torah with modern scholarship, Leibowitz's seminal contribution to the discussion is conspicuous in its absence.

[60] As intimated by his biographical account, ibid pp. 7-8. Shades of the later Wittgenstein (see excursus) may also be discerned in the fact that an entire chapter of Solomon's book (pp. 299-315) is devoted to various theories regarding the nature of truth and their implications for the doctrine of Torah from Heaven, in which correspondence theory is declared the weakest.

> "At the beginning of this book I recollected how, as a child, I sat in the synagogue and mused about the meaning of 'The Lord spoke to Moses saying'. I still don't understand it, though I am less worried than I was. Nor have the great scholars and theologians who debate such weighty matters enlightened me yet, so I must resign myself to continuing uncertainty and confusion."[61]

In diminishing the importance of understanding precisely what is meant by God's speech (or even of affirming that an actual event, whose witnesses collectively experienced as revelatory, indeed took place) and labeling the belief in Torah from Heaven a "myth of origin", Solomon, like Leibowitz, implies that the purpose of religious language is not to impart information – metaphysical or otherwise. But there is a difference in the degree of receptivity to the original text that the views of Leibowitz and Solomon mandate.

Because Leibowitz still appeals to a form of reasoning beyond religious discourse in stipulating the existence of a God whose transcendent nature is beyond the ken of human understanding, and not revealed in history, he is driven to demythologize the "religious facts" described in the Torah which purport to talk about God and His relationship with the world.[62] Instead of taking such descriptive statements at face value, Leibowitz relates to them as value judgments and prescriptive directives for behavior, so that they will not clash with his pre-conceived theological views. Solomon's understanding, by contrast, allows him to accept the mythic formulations unconditionally, with no theological strings attached.

Irrespective of questions regarding their original intent and context,[63] Solomon's point is that it is only when biblical narratives are treated strictly as

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[61] *Torah from Heaven* (ibid), p. 346

[62] The degree of Wittgenstein's influence on Leibowitz, if any, is difficult to discern. Both Sagi ("A Breakthrough in Jewish Philosophy") and Bareli ("Faith and Mitvot") note some resemblance between the role that Leibowitz accords halakha in establishing the sanctified status of the Torah as the foundational text of Judaism and the critical importance that the later Wittgenstein attributed to context in establishing meaning. Nevertheless, Leibowitz's evaluation of metaphysical truth claims as utterly meaningless on a factual level is more strongly reminiscent of the logical positivist distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive statements established by Wittgenstein in his earlier writings. Moreover, as Sagi himself observes, such similarities do not necessarily reflect direct influence; although Leibowitz knew of Wittgenstein's work and spoke of it approvingly, most of his own ideas were framed long before the publication of Wittgenstein's writings.

[63] The question whether biblical narratives were originally written for mythic purposes remains a moot point. Some of the genealogies or chronologies appearing in the Torah which bear no moral or theological message certainly do not lend themselves to this assumption and are better understood as bona fide attempts at reporting history, whose inaccuracies simply reflect mistaken beliefs that people

history that questions of "accuracy" become appropriate, and the need to formulate apologetic resolutions with an eye to contemporary sensibilities arises. When treated as a myth of origin, the traditional account of revelation - even if it appears today as entirely fictitious or overwhelmingly inaccurate - can still bear theological validity *as it stands*. Its rationality or "truth" is maintained not by appeal to external evidence or re-interpretation, but in its ability to discharge its mythic function, imbuing those who appropriate it with a sense of allegiance to the past and inducing them to relate to the received text of Scripture as sacrosanct.[64]

The Wittgenstinian flavor of Solomon's approach is corroborated by his allusion, in passing, to some measure of affinity with the concept of "narrative theology",[65] now fashionable in some Christian circles identified as "post-liberal". While rejecting the salvific significance that Christians find in reading Scripture in general and in telling the story of Jesus in particular, Solomon acknowledges some similarity between this Christian trend and the role that he accords to biblical narrative in constructing Jewish self-understanding.

In both cases, the diminished emphasis on the propositional value of religious truth statements is easily traced to the influence of Wittgenstein's later thought (see excursus below), which viewed religious language as a category of discourse that imparts its own particular "form of life" to those who participate in its "language game" and its distinctive "grammar". More

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held at the time. However, the fact that other aspects of the accounts of our ancestors, such as repeated barrenness of the matriarchs or even the sacrificial binding of Isaac were adopted by rival traditions (with regard to the latter, see, for example, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*; translated from the Hebrew, with an introduction by Judah Goldin [New York: Pantheon Books, 1967]), strongly suggests the influence of prevailing conventions as to how tales of origin should be written, and perhaps the lack of a clear distinction between myth and systematic history in ancient times.

[64] A similar opinion is voiced by Amit Kula, who acknowledges the possibility of a belief in Torah from heaven that does not depend on the historicity of the biblical account of revelation, although this is not his personal opinion – see his *Existential or Non-Essential*. Kula's stance accords with that of Rabbi. A.I. Kook, who undoubtedly granted great credence to the biblical narratives of Israel's past, but was prepared in principle to advance an acceptance of Torah which was based - at least temporarily – on the beneficial influence of these narratives, even in the absence of faith in their historical accuracy – see his Iggrot Reayah I (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook,.1985), pp. 48-49. In Iggrot Reayah II (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), pp. 118-119), Kook appears to extend this attitude even further, when he leaves the decision as to how far nonliteral interpretations can be applied to the Torah to the "clear sense of the nation", which "finds its paths not in isolated bits of evidence, but in general impressions". In this connection, it is worth noting Barukh Schwartz's contention that this mythic function of the biblical account of the giving of the Torah is confirmed by historical scholarship, which indicates that the notion of a supernatural verbal revelation of God's will at a precise historical moment was developed centuries *after* the characteristically Jewish way of life had already been established – see "Matan Torah" (ibid).

[65] Solomon, *Torah from Heaven* (ibid), p. 313

importantly, the appeal to the role of narrative in both cases releases believers from the need to read and interpret verses in a strained and artificial manner, in order to support preconceived doctrinal positions.

X – Post-Liberalism and "As If" Beliefs

Scholarly debate continues to this day regarding the extent to which Wittgenstein himself was a "non-realist" in matters of religion (i.e., the extent to which he regarded religious discourse as expressive rather than fact-stating).[66] It may well be (as I myself intend to argue further on) that the very distinction between realism and non-realism in a religious context is misleading and inappropriate.[67] But to the degree that Wittgenstein's post-liberal disciples free religious discourse from *any* closely defined propositional function, their narrative approach to Scripture easily joins forces with a broader interest on the part of various contemporary philosophers in highlighting the place of "as if" beliefs in all aspects of our cognitive activity.[68]

Appreciating the role of "as if" beliefs has become particularly interesting in our day, given recent revolutionary developments in the philosophy of science, which suggest that, even in the "hard" sciences, key concepts can be considered convenient fictions. Contrary to what many non-scientists tend to assume, it is now pointed out that even entities such as protons and electrons, waves of light, gravity as distortions of space, are not things that anyone has seen or proven to exist. Nevertheless, because they are useful constructs that work for the moment, we employ them "as if" they were true.

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[66] For a summary of some sample views, see Michael Scott, "Wittgenstein and Realism", in *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 2, April 2000, pp. 170-190.

[67] For a concise defense of this position with regard to interpretations of Wittgenstein, see Jacob Joshua Ross, "Religious Truth and Realism in Wittgenstein and the Wittgenstinians", *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: A Reassessment after 50 Years – Papers of the 24th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, vol. IX (2) (Kirchberg am Wechsel: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2001), pp. 254-257.

[68] For two notable precursors of this trend, now better known as "constructivism", see Jeremy Bentham, "Theory of Fictions", in *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*, compiled and edited by C.K. Ogden, [London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932]) and Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of As-If: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, translated by C.K. Ogden [London: K. Paul, Trench & Co., 1924]). The latter work, which offers one of the earliest and most comprehensive expositions of the importance of "useful fictions" – i.e., beliefs that we know are not true but still come in handy - suggests that ultimate truth would always be beyond us. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, we need to create partial truths and act "as if" they were true if they are beneficial to us. More radical and contemporary extensions of this view, as represented by Continental postmodern philosophers such as Jean Boudrillard (1929-2007), or in the more recent work of Anglican philosopher and theologian, Rev. Don Cupitt, reject all distinction between reality and its representation, contending that there *is* no truth beyond language and the depictions that we construct.

In a scientific context, the primary function of "as if" beliefs is to help us organize our everyday reality in such a way that guides and contributes to the way we conduct our practical day to day living. In a religious context, the distinctive interpretations of the past which their narrative renditions promote come to foster a cultural-linguistic picture which illuminates this practical life, infusing it with more profound "meaning".[69] When enveloped in mythic trappings linking them to metaphysical forces, such beliefs generate a stock of suggestive images and associations that tacitly direct the way we experience and deal with the more spiritually challenging aspects of human existence (e.g., birth, aging, death, interpersonal relations, suffering and unforeseen calamities).

At times, these beliefs serve to preserve our sense of wonder and awareness of the mysterious boundary conditions of human experience that exceed rational comprehension. At other times, they function more politically, structuring verbal or non-verbal behaviors that define the community of the faithful and establish group membership. On this view, profession of belief in Torah from Heaven is part of a vocabulary of religious identity.[70] It is a "rule of thumb" with which to approach the world in company with one's co-religionists, rather than a fully informed judgment about history or theology, serving - among other functions – as a signal that the speaker is a bona fide member of the group. Indeed, as Sam Lebens (a postdoctoral fellow at Rutger University's center for the philosophy of religion who monitored several discussions of this approach at the virtual Association for the Philosophy of Judaism) suggests, sometimes it is precisely the strangeness of the professed "belief" or the costliness of the non-verbal behavior it engenders that renders the signal strong and hence a credible sign of allegiance.[71] *

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[69] For a similar formulation of this contrast, see Solomon (ibid),, p. 314-315

[70] For a similar view, see the essay of Eliezer (Louis) Finkelman on TheTorah.com, especially part 2, "Torah from Heaven: A Question of Evidence or Loyalty" (http://thetorah.com/torah-from-heaven-evidence-or-loyalty/).

[71] For formulation of this suggestion and lively discussion of related topics, see Lebens' virtual Association for the Philosophy of Judaism: http://philosophyofjudaism.blogspot.com/ , and particularly the symposia entitled Wettstein's "Doctrine"/ "Theological Impressionism"; "Religious Belief, Make-Believe, and Science; Foundational Questions for the Study of Judaism"; "Evidence and Exodus." It should be noted, however, that while Lebens appears on this site as a sympathetic exponent of the "as if" approach, he nevertheless deems it necessary to ground religious commitment on a thoroughly realist understanding of some key classical beliefs about God and revelation, which would allow viewing the canonical make-believe attitudes of Judaism as divinely ordained – see Lebens, "The Epistemology of Religiosity: An Orthodox Jewish perspective", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74:3 (2013) pp. 315-332 . (I thank Lebens for this clarification). This, of course, places Lebens on a playing field similar to that of Kugel, still begging the unresolved epistemological and philosophical difficulties of this stance, shared by Rosenzweig and other Buberian forbearers. For a more recemt attempt to formulate a comprehensive theology of revelation that emphatically rejects any

Post-liberals would deny that draining religious belief of firm propositional content in this fashion is to be equated with "Orthopraxy" - a term often used pejoratively, when referring to conformity of religious practice without any assumption of its doctrinal underpinnings. The doctrinal claims of religion are, on their view, best understood as fidelity to a certain vision or way of looking at the world. Rather than conveying metaphysical or spiritual truths or ways of behaving that are correct in and of themselves, their importance lies in providing the visual images, vocabulary, and skills that allow us to think about such questions and with directives for conducting our lives in accordance with these thoughts.

XI – Post-Liberalism as the Ultimate Safety Net for Classical Religion in the Modern World

From the point of view of Orthodox Judaism, another significant point of similarity between defining Torah from Heaven as a foundational myth and post-liberal theology (beyond a loose understanding of doctrine) is the unusual combination of radical post-modernism and nearly fundamentalist traditionalism that both positions afford.[72] Despite the extreme liberty that they display in divorcing the meaning of religious statements from the historical circumstances in which they were formulated, Christian post-liberals nevertheless insist upon absolute commitment to abide by the formal guidelines of the religious system within which they function, and to submit to their internal authority.

Since the deepest urge of religious discourse according to this approach is not to report *about* reality, but rather to fashion and direct it in accordance with the guidelines unique to this discourse, its frames of reference are derived internally and not translated into other terms. Hence, acceptance of a religious tradition means agreeing to speak in a very specific way. It involves a willingness to behave according to the rules established by this tradition for conducting its activities, without regard for the claims of any

version of the "as if" approach in favor of a more robust metaphysical grounding, while still allowing for an unapologetic non-historical reading of the Torah, see Jerome Yehuda Gellman , "*This was from God" - A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016). Spelling out the theological implications of these differences is a project I would like to address in the future.

[72] For further amplification, see Tamar Ross, "Religious Belief in a Postmodern Age", in *Faith: Jewish Perspectives*, edited by Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), pp. 188-240

natural, metaphysical or moral realities that bear an independent existence outside of this framework.[73]

Transposing this approach to Orthodox Judaism, accepting Torah from Heaven as a myth of origin rather than a precise historical account frees the religious believer to relate to each and every word of the Torah "as if" it were literally dictated by God and to embrace the written along with the Oral Torah as "a unified whole".[74] As Solomon explains:

> "The narrative of Torah from Heaven presents the Torah as a timeless whole, revealed by God and managed by the rabbis. By introducing a divine point of origin for the whole, it stakes a claim to perfection…[and] renders itself immune from historical criticism. We may say 'Torah from Heaven ' is 'true' in this sense, meaning that it effectively discharges its mythic function."[75]…"Since myth is impervious to historical evidence, moral questioning, and the like, we do not have to 'pick and choose' which bits of tradition to regard as 'Torah from Heaven'; we simply tell the story".[76]

So long as belief in divine revelation is professed in accordance with the conceptual scheme of this story and the logical principles that flow from it, it maintains continuity with tradition even when its meaning is now understood or experienced in a new way. Practical or ethical difficulties of

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[73] In view of the complaints registered against Leibowitz and Kugel and their allegedly impoverished reading of scripture (see above, section VIII), it is instructive to see how this combination of radical postmodernism and reactionary traditionalism plays out in the way that Christian post-liberals approach canonical texts. In his book, aptly entitled *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), post-liberal theologian Hans Frei criticizes the often pernicious effect that modern Protestant historical-critical scholarship has had on the understanding and reading of Scripture. This type of interpretation, according to Frei, becomes "a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story" (ibid, p. 130). As a result, the meaning of the Bible is rendered decipherable only to an academic elite employing highly artificial methods of harmonization in order to fabricate "solutions" not to be found in Scripture at all. What is lost, according to Frei, in the often over-accommodating apologetics of such interpretations is the traditional reading of the Bible as a "realistic narrative". In Frei's version of post-liberal understanding, while rejecting the notion of biblical inerrancy (i.e., that Scripture is completely accurate in all matters of history and science), the rationality and relevance or "truth" of Scriptural faith and practice is maintained, not by appeal to external evidence, but rather by skillfully using its internal grammar in an intra-textual manner to provide an intelligible interpretation on its own terms. See also George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). pp. 79-84.

[74] Solomon, *Torah from Heaven*, p. 316-317.

[75] Solomon, *Torah from Heaven* , p. 313

[76] Solomon, *Torah from Heaven*, p. 346

implementation that may arise in the wake of this approach are resolved by pointing to circumstantial differences between narratives of the past and present-day realities and exploiting interpretive possibilities that are opened up as a result.

In a sense, a constructivist approach to divine revelation (viewing it as a type of cultural-linguistic "placeholder" for sustaining routine religious attitudes and behavior) can be taken as the apologetic of all apologetics, a meta-solution broad enough to cover even the most general and all-pervasive critique regarding the "truth" of this Jewish dogma. Since the function of myths is not strictly cognitive, but rather to nurture a more elusive sensibility or way of relating to the world, it is not enough according to this approach, or even necessary, to believe that they are true in the classical sense of the term. Far more important is to live your life *as if* they are true.

Even when accepted as literally true, biblical narratives are simply a starting point, becoming a religious reality only when embodied in props and rituals that may appear more like games than serious action, but whose purpose is to work psychologically upon the community of believers, evoking in them a sense of sacred significance. The biblical insistence upon telling, retelling, studying, and commemorating accounts of the many occasions when God engaged with Israel, as well as the Rabbinic injunction that individual members of each and every generation see themselves "as if" they personally had been delivered from Egypt,[77] thereby existentially re-enacting renewal of the covenant, illustrate this point. As noted by Lebens: "Much of the Torah itself can be construed as a 'reminiscing,' or a call to reminisce, about the many occasions when God engaged with Israel, thereby inducing a relationship of mutual love and concern between them."[78]

Some Aggadic statements qualified by the Rabbis with the caveat of *kivyakhol* ("as it were") may also have been conceived in this spirit,

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[77] BT *Pesahim* 116b

[78] See the comment section of the "Evidence and Exodus" featured on his virtual Association for the Philosophy of Judaism (supra, n. 71). Rachel Adler provides poignant affirmation of this from a critical feminist perspective, when remarking (in "I've Had Nothing Yet, So I Can't Take More", *Moment* 8 [September 1983], p. 23): "The woman hearing the Torah reading [on the festival of Shavuot, which celebrates the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai] is not there to study social organization in the ancient Middle East. If she were, she would accept as a given that in the culture under examination, women held an inferior status. That would have nothing to do with her. But (accepting Eliade's contention that every ritual is a re-enactment of a primary event), the woman's purpose in being present this Shavuot morning must be to re-enact through this reading the first covenant of her people. And because the text has excluded her, she is excluded again in this re-enactment and will be excluded over and over, year by year, every time she rises to hear this covenant read."

deliberately formulated as useful fictions (rather than as symbolic pointers to an ontological reality beyond them) for broader pedagogical purposes.[79] Maimonides' distinction between "necessary beliefs" and "correct beliefs," extended even further in the writings of R. Kook, is another manifestation of this non-cognitive stance.[82]

In an age when the abyss between the literal meaning of religious statements and the ability of the community of believers to accept them at face value steadily increases, post-liberals can justifiably view their intra-textual narrative approach as a more effective guarantee for the continued viability of such statements than any modernist attempts to understand them in terms of their compliance with an external standard. Indeed, one might contend that it is precisely this understanding of how biblical narrative functions that explains the continued vibrancy of Judaism, despite the fact that its core theological claim now appears scientifically weak and its commandment-centered approach to religion at odds with current notions of human autonomy. Whatever vitality Judaism has stems from the form of life that these myths have engendered and the grasp that it has upon its adherents. A narrative account, which is inaccurate in some of its details or even a total fiction, can still be adopted by a community and revealed as the word of God from within the community whose way of life it supports.[83]

XII – Is the "As If" Approach Sufficient to Maintain Passionate Religiosity?

Post-liberals do not have a monopoly on an "as if" approach to religious doctrine. Indeed, it would be fair to say that most believers in the past assumed such an attitude unreflectively, simply allowing the concrete experience of their everyday lives to be shaped by the truth claims of their religious tradition, without dwelling overmuch on their precise doctrinal content. More specifically, professions of belief in divine revelation for rank

[79] For a few such examples, contrasted with counter-examples bearing a more essentialist thrust, see Batya Hefter, "The term *kivyakhol* in Talmudic Literature" [Hebrew], in *Michlol – Ktav et rav-tehumi*, vol. 29 (Jerusalem: Michlelet Yerushalayim, 2013), pp. 35-58

[82] Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III, chapter 28; Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shmoneh Kevatzim* (Kiryat Arba: Dfus Bodner-Hebron, 1999), kovetz aleph, par. 155. For elaboration upon the precise nature of R. Kook's extension of the Maimonidian conception, see Tamar Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi A.I. Kook and Postmodernism", pp. 491-492. For a possible medieval precedent for this type of extension, see "Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 1, edited by Isadore Twersky, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 239-242

[83] For a similar view regarding the relationship between belief in Torah from Heaven (which because of its inherent unintelligibility might ultimately amount to no more than a phonetic commitment) and the "grip" of the halakhic form of life as product rather than cause, see Moshe Halbertal, "Bein Madaei Ha-Yahadut le-dat Yisrael",*Machshevet Yisrael ve-Emunat Yisrael* (Mosad Bialik, 2012), pp. 11-20.

and file traditional Jews, then as now, signified loyalty to the Torah and the way of life that it propagates. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that when the "as if" quality of religious belief is adopted consciously and deliberately as a blanket response to newfound awareness that the doctrine of Torah from Heaven may not be literally "real" or "true" in any common-sense understanding of these terms, conducting one's day to day living in accordance with its guidelines could be more problematic.

Applying an "as if" approach in order to speak descriptively and after-the-fact regarding the function of particular aspects of our religious language is one thing; appropriating this approach in advance, as a general panacea is quite another. Conscious and wholesale reliance upon "as if" understandings invites openness to the possibility of various levels of commitment to the belief structure as a whole because the grip of its picture upon us is no longer complete. While the narrative framework typically functions as a type of (Kantian) a-priori-like scheme for the simple believer, the moment one acknowledges the possibility that *any* religious statement parading as truth is capable of being understood simply as a construct, all that such an a-priori scheme amounts to is a system of acquired skills that could have been otherwise.[85]

This difficulty has been portrayed inimitably on the Internet, by a Modern Orthodox blogger tormented by his crisis of faith in the notion of a divinely revealed Torah. In his search for a solution over several years, he covered many of the positions described above, aided and abetted by the considerable virtual community he drew around him. When finally arriving at appreciation of the "as if" position, however, he vividly portrays the dilemma that such self-awareness raises:

> Someone once commented on one of my many former blogs that religion is a form of *kabuki* (Japanese theatre). And this time of year, the theater is in full swing.
>
> Right now it's *Tisha B'av*. We feel sad and mournful. We act sad, we do sad rituals like eating egg in ash and

[85] Under such circumstances, constructs that are accepted universally as the common-sense view of "the way things are in the world" will have the most persuasive power; talk of God's existence might be somewhat less compelling, while the partisan views of a particular faith community will be most vulnerable to freedom of choice. Commitment at this last and most contingent level could range from the contention that *x* is not necessarily so, to the contention that *x* is bad, or even that the world would be better off without *x* entirely – see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, Harvard University Press 2000, 19-21

sitting on the floor. The mood is oppressive and depressing. We breathlessly focus on every car crash and other bad events that always seem to happen *davka* during the three weeks. We say platitudes about the importance of *achdus*. We even hold *asefas* and have top lawyers give us *mussar*. We complain about the lack of *fleishigs*. We can't wait for it to end.

But deep down, we kinda enjoy it I think. I could have just skipped *Tisha B'av* this year completely. I mean, why bother? What's the point? But as soon as I heard the first words of *Eichah*, I was glad I didn't skip it. It's a powerful piece of theater. Just like we enjoy going to sad or scary movies, we enjoy *Tisha B'av*. It feels good to feel bad. Then of course we have *Shabbos Nachamu*, and then *Ellul*. Ever spent *Ellul* in a REAL Yeshiva? I have. And I can still remember how powerful it was, and probably always will.

Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur Succos – all elaborate theater. Complete with costumes, props, drama, comedy, scary parts, happy parts – it's all there. Where do you get such thrills, such feelings in everyday life? From the movies? From going to the bar every night? Maybe you can, or maybe life feels somehow emptier and more vacuous.

And it's not just the *Yomim Noroim* where the performances are stellar. Every *Shabbos*, every Friday night, every *Seuda Shelishis,* in a decent *shul* (and not some *kalte* MO intellectual place) is elaborate theater. And even every day has a little bit of theater – *shacharis, mincha, maariv*. Even a humble *bracha* – you're talking to THE SUPREME BEING for goodness sake! And not only that, HE'S FREAKING LISTENING TO YOU! The drama is overwhelming.

True, sometimes you need a break. Too much of a good thing and all that. Plus, if you keep reminding yourself that it's only a show, it can get annoying, especially when too much audience participation is required. But who goes to a great movie and sits there during the scary bits saying out loud: "They're just actors, the cameraman is right there!"?... We enjoy the performance; we want it to be as real as

possible. It's Tony and Tina's Wedding show writ large.[86] And maybe there's something to that. If only I could just forget about that damn camera-man.[87]

Surely, the fact that myths of origin in all religions present themselves as historical accounts, imposing an aura of objectivity, has something to do with their staying power. It also has something to teach us regarding a universal human need to ground our religious commitments on firmer territory than the product of a cameraman, no matter how powerful the show.

Conveying reasonable import may not be the main function of religious truth claims, but a strong sense that their ultimate referent is *un*reasonable (that is to say, ungrounded in reality) might well render them ineffective in accomplishing the regulative function for which they *are* meant: i.e., to compose the "picture" that stands behind the religious form of life. Hence, when doctrines that are part and parcel of the religious form of life appear untenable, the post-liberal constructivist no less than any other conflicted believer will feel impelled to subject them to an additional line of defense that will remove such complaints.[88]

So long as this additional defense is conducted from within the religious discourse itself (i.e., attempting to substantiate the path of a particular religion on its own terms), the self-aware post-liberal can still travel hand in hand with the naïve rank and file believer for a very long way in preserving the psychological force of his or her religious commitments. For

[86] The reference is to a comedy belonging to the genre of interactive productions that aim to heighten audience participation by eliminating the distinction between audience and cast. In this particular performance, offstage audience members are treated as guests at the wedding by the actors in an improvised manner.

[87] Copied from the blog of Modern Orthoprax, July 30, 2009 – which has since been deleted from the internet.

[88] The universal urge to engage in rational justifications and claims to objectivity has been leveled against Wittgenstinians who adopt an overly-narrow view of language games as incommensurable. According to their critics, the religious language game, in particular, cannot be viewed solipsistically, as a self-contained activity, ignoring its many overlaps with other varieties of discourse. See, for example, Michael W. Nicholson, "Abusing Wittgenstein: The Misuse of the Concept of Language Games in Contemporary Theology", *JETS* 39/4 (December 1996), pp. 617-629; Michael Martin, "Wittgenstein's Lectures on Religious Belief", http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/wittgenstein.html). Another alternative, of course, would be to adopt a fideist position, i.e. that irrational adherence to a faith claim in direct opposition to reason is itself a religious virtue. (For a few instances of this position, which is not very evident in Jewish tradition, see Tamar Ross, "The Anti-Rationalist Trend in the Musar Movement" [Heb.], *Alei Shefer: MehkarimBe-sifrut He-hagut Ha-yehudit*, edited by Moshe Halamish [Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990], pp. 145-162).

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all practical purposes, the two will not differ radically on this level in the mix of pragmatism and realist rhetoric that they may adopt in order to defend the claims upon which such commitments rest.

In the case of descriptive statements open to critical scientific investigation (such as the age of the universe, the splitting of the Red Sea, the chronology of biblical accounts), the sophisticated believer adopting a cultural-linguist approach will find the task of relating such statements to a presumed reality relatively easy. There already exists a long history of naturalistic or allegorical interpretations within the religious tradition itself upon which such a believer can draw. Although his or her attachment to the tradition will not rise or fall on the results of this enterprise, he or she may well regard such efforts at reconciling reason with faith as part and parcel of the religious language game itself.

Dealing with mythic explanations of descriptive statements that border on the historic is also relatively unproblematic. We may have no way of knowing whether or not the Red Sea did indeed split, whether the ancient Hebrews really did undergo some revelatory experience at Sinai, whether someday there actually will appear a Messiah who will inaugurate a new epoch in the history of mankind. Nonetheless, even when such explanations assume the existence of metaphysical forces or an occurrence of historic events not liable to scrutiny, the sophisticated believer adopting a cultural-linguistic approach will find no problem in employing traditional religious vocabulary grounded on "realist" epistemological assumptions. Such a believer can justify this practice in terms of the spiritual attitudes which they engender, and the ways of reacting to and meeting situations which they inspire.

In the event that the difficulty posed to religious belief stems from statements that are even farther removed from rational demonstration or confirmable human experience, more innovative theological solutions can also be brought into the fray. God's justice, despite the Holocaust, may be explained as reflecting a new development in the covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel, in which divine responsibility is abdicated in the interests of greater equality between the partners. By the same token, mythic talk of God's dictation and dogmatic assertions that every word of the Torah was transmitted from Heaven by direct dictation may be refined by focusing on those strands in Jewish tradition that can be understood as supporting current

theological consensus regarding God's pure spirituality or our common sense notions of reality.

Even if all religious believers accept the premise that when speaking of matters of faith we must at some stage turn to non-representational modes of expression that do not purport to simply state "the facts of the matter," however, much of the emotional fervor characterizing debates regarding deviations from literalism will remain. This further stems from the question: "to what extent can the move from a propositional to an 'as if' mode be tolerated or condoned?" Does it stop at the point of non-literal interpretations of God's mighty arm, God's creation of the world in six days and resting on the seventh, God's fashioning of Adam from the dust of the earth and Eve from his side (or rib), or the hearing of God's voice at Sinai?

We often tend to ignore the fact that what is really at stake in such debates is not the question: "what degree of objective difficulty posed by historical or philosophical insights to the religious framework compels fine-tuning?" What really concerns us is the question: "where exactly does the key to our ultimate commitment lie?" If we accept the premise that even the most basic claim of divine revelation can only be justified from within the specific vocabulary of a particular religious tradition, do we have any recourse to a transcendent vantage point that extends beyond the human desires, values and visions that this tradition expresses? In other words, can we speak, from within an "as if" context, of a reality that is free of "as if"? And if not, what justification might there be for reference to overarching metaphysical claims that can only be judged from within?

Philosopher Jeffrey Stout's wry characterization of the position he identifies as "skeptical realism" (i.e., questioning whether words refer to any pre-defined objective reality) aptly illustrates the dilemma of a die-hard constructivist at this stage of religious belief:

> The skeptical realist is more like someone who wants to be his own father and then has the nature of that desire brought to light in therapy. He might be unhappy, perhaps even hard to console, upon realizing that he will never be his own father, but it's hard to see how he could have good reason for wallowing in the disappointment of such an incoherent

> desire. What fuels the unhappiness, it seems safe to suppose,
> is still half-thinking that maybe the desire does make sense.[89]

At this point, it would appear that even a constructivist approach to balancing the tension between cognitive dissonance and religious loyalty (i.e., an approach that regards religious beliefs as useful tools rather than inevitable representations of a reality independent of the human mind) reaches the limits of its apologetic power. "As if" explanations may serve to over-ride localized intellectual and moral difficulties raised by religious claims that appear on the surface as propositions, but can such a view – when sidestepping the dubious ontological status of religious symbols altogether – leave us with anything more than a feeble motive for abiding religious commitment?

The inherent inability of post-liberalism to provide a patent "objectivity" that is at any point guaranteed by reference to some factor that exceeds the limits and partisan biases of human experience inevitably leads all who struggle with this question from the psychological difficulty to the philosophical one. Given the premise that true religious commitment must be tied to *some* sense of divine transcendence, can we know or experience a God that is by definition beyond definition and beyond our grasp?

In recent years, a new stream of pragmatist philosophers (including Stout himself)[90] has been struggling to rehabilitate some version of truth and objectivity whose authority extends beyond social consensus, communal solidarity, and pragmatics even in secular terms. In the concluding paragraphs of his book, Solomon may be alluding to the need to address this issue within a religious framework when he admits that classifying the doctrine of Torah from Heaven as myth is "only one part of a bigger story."[91]

Changing the status of the doctrine of Torah from Heaven from historical truth to foundational myth may by-pass many specific questions arising out of the clash between scientific and religious world-views, thereby counteracting the dialectical theologians' basis for selectivity. But due to its anomalous juxtaposition of insider and outsider perspectives (man "hears"

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[89] Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 254.

[90] See Steven Levine, "Rehabilitating Objectivity: Rorty, Brandom, and the New Pragmatism", in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40:4 (December 2010), pp. 567-589; *New Pragmatism*, edited by Cheryl Misak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), including Stout's contribution: "On our Interest in Getting it Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism", pp. 7-31

[91] Solomon, *Torah from Heaven*, p. 346

God's voice, yet the very talk of God and His communication with man is "as if", and ontologically dubious), and the centrality of this essentially paradoxical stance to the religious way of life[92], its metaphysical claims are *sui generis*, a special case. Simply assuming the conceptual coherence of a God that verbally communicates with man, while ignoring the dubious ontological status of such talk, is insufficient when conducted within an "as if" framework that is self-aware. In order to accomplish its psychological task, constructivist assumptions about divine communication must also engage in serious examination of what "And the Lord spoke to Moses" might possibly mean, even beyond its own self-certifying justification as the linchpin for a spiritually meaningful way of life.

XIII – Is a First-Order Constructivist Theology Possible?

I believe that the solution to constructivist awareness in a religious context lies primarily in developing a first order theology[93] that blurs the sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and between God's existence and human initiative. A few years ago, I undertook an interpretive project that might be regarded as a first step in this direction. On the surface, the book I wrote[94] was devoted to the challenge of feminism to belief in the divinity of the Torah. For me, however, feminism was merely an excuse and an extreme case in point for addressing the larger issue of divine revelation altogether.

Ultimately, my suggestion was that it is still possible to maintain belief in the divinity of the Torah despite the feminist critique and other marks of human imprint, by breaking down the strict dichotomy between divine speech and natural historic process. This task was facilitated by re-appropriating three assumptions that already have their basis in tradition.

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[92] Difference of opinions regarding the centrality of the metaphysical claim relate to debate amongst Wittgenstein's disciples regarding the degree to which various language games are self-contained and incommensurable. For an eloquent rejection of that position, see: D..Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games", *The Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 134-135

[93] "First order" in this context is meant to designate theological understandings that are primary to any belief system, functioning in accordance with that system's own internal concepts and guidelines. "Second order" understandings, by contrast, function less immediately, as a type of meta-view that comes to reflect, in terms that are external to the tradition, upon the talk and practice of theology from within.

[94] Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Hanover and London: New England University Press, 2004).

The first assumption I drew upon was that if the Torah is to bear a message for all generations, its revelation must be a cumulative process: a dynamic unfolding that reveals its ultimate significance only through time.

The second assumption, already implied in the first, was that God's message is not expressed through the reverberation of vocal chords[95], but rather through the rabbinical interpretation of the texts, which may or may not be accompanied by an evolution in human understanding, and through the mouthpiece of history. History, and particularly what happens to the Jewish people – the ideas and forms they accept as well as the process of determining those they reject – is essentially another form of ongoing revelation, a surrogate prophecy. As the Talmud states: "If they are not prophets, they are the descendants of prophets."[96]

The third assumption (supported by contemporary hermeneutic theory) was that although successive hearings of God's Torah sometimes *appear* to contradict God's original message, that message is never totally replaced. On a formal level, the original Sinaitic revelation always remains the primary cultural-linguistic filter through which these new deviations are received and understood. By blurring distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, the finite and the infinite, I contended that it is possible to relate to the Torah as a divine document without being bound to untenable notions regarding the nature of God and God's methods of communication, or denying the role of human involvement and of historical process in the Torah's formulation. Such an understanding allows the religiously committed to now understand that the Torah can be totally human and totally divine at one and the same time.

In my book, I apply the concept of cumulative revelation to the problem at hand, suggesting that even the phenomenon of feminism might be regarded by traditionalists as another vehicle for the transmission of God's word. To the extent that feminism takes hold of and informs the life of the halakhically committed, and the community's authoritative bodies manage to find what they believe to be genuine support for this emerging worldview in a new reading of Torah, this felicitous convening might be regarded by traditionalists as another vehicle for the transmission of God's word.

[95] Neither God's own, nor those of a "created voice," as some medieval commentators suggested in order to avoid the problem of anthropomorphic visions of God.
[96] BT, *Pesachim* 66:a,b

Because of our commitment to Torah as the foundational canon of Judaism, however, we do not supplant the formal status of the original patriarchal model as an immutable element of tradition. We continue to employ its language as a necessary prism for the achievement of greater moral sensibilities, even as we view revolutionary changes in the status of women as heaven-sent prompts to re-interpret or limit its residual effects, occasionally turning what might have been construed as their original intent on its head. By the same token, I could claim that our current brush with the profound challenges of biblical criticism might also be regarded as expression of the divine will, perhaps indicating that we have outgrown more primitive understandings of the nature of divine revelation and are now ready for transposal of this belief to a new, more sublime stage.[97]

Not unexpectedly, my attempt to resolve the theological challenge of human imprints to a purportedly divine text got mixed reviews. I have already responded to these in other forums,[98] and have no interest in continuing here. The question to which I would like to refer now, however, is how far the amalgam of inside and outside perspectives that I proposed can be stretched even by a constructivist without reaching a dead end.

In endeavoring to formulate an understanding of divine revelation that cannot be rejected on rational grounds, I continue to engage with the internal language of tradition and its appeal to metaphysics. This led some critics, who did not take sufficient note of my post-liberal orientation, to take me as retaining some residually fundamentalist understanding of the traditional account of revelation at Sinai,[99] or of being bound to some literal notion of divine intervention in directing its interpretation.[100] Others, however, understood that even when asserting that God speaks cumulatively through history and the development of human understanding, I recognize, on a second order level, that the basis for this mythic talk stems from internal rather than objective considerations.

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[97] See Rabbi A.I. Kook, *Orot Ha-Emunah* (Brooklyn: Langsam Associates, 1985), pp. 74-75. R. Kook's remarks in this passage relate to a general need to graduate from childish, primitive images in the course of our religious development, but certainly can be applied to notions of revelation as well.

[98] Tamar Ross, "Response to Yoel Finkelman's Review of *Expanding the Palace of Torah", Edah Journal* 4:2 (Kislev, 2004), pp. 11-25 (republished in Hebrew translation in *Akdamot* 16 (Spring 2005), pp. 185-224); idem, "Guarding the Treasure and Guarding the Tongue (*Shemirat Halashon)*, "Response to Aryeh Frimer's Review of *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism," Badad* 19 (January 2008), pp. 93-123; see also *Expanding the Palace*, chapter 11.

[99] Solomon Schimmel, *The Tenacity of Unreasonable Beliefs: Fundamentalism and the Fear of Truth* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, p. 202)

[100] Norman Solomon, *Torah from Heaven*, p.270

While my theology is deliberately fashioned in a manner that can co-exist with universal naturalistic understandings, it certainly is not mandated by them. For this reason, I offer my theology tentatively as a plausible, rather than necessary or exclusive model for explaining the anomalies of belief in divine authorship of the Torah. Even when identifying strongly with this model, I realize that it can co-exist with other models, and may eventually be replaced by another more illuminating picture. Expression of both the necessity and the fragility of this mode of theology can be found in Wittgenstein's memorable statement:

> "An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it is really is possible to walk on it." [102]

Similar ideas regarding the tentative nature of theological models abound in Rabbi A. I. Kook's writings as well.[103]

XIV – Tolerating the Fragility of Theological Constructs: Does Self-Awareness make them too Fragile?

Because my proposal views the appeal to a hypothetical metaphysical entity as a reality-producing construct open to revision, it is more capable of tolerating the fragility of theological explanations, recognizing them for the temporary stopgaps that they are. This arguably renders adherents of this approach better equipped for preserving their religious commitment than a less reflective believer still operating with naive ontological pretensions.

Nevertheless, given the self-awareness such a theological system affords, can the continued use of a mythic vocabulary – albeit of a softer sort that muddies the distinction divine speech and natural historical process – still be taken by the believer as reference to anything more than the binding

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[102] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 76. - It is interesting to contrast Wittgenstein's tolerance of theological acrobatics with his envisioning of one of the goals of philosophy as "shewing the fly out of the bottle"(idem, *Philosophical Investigations* [3rd Edition], trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe [New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953/1968], Proposition #309, p. 103), or his likening of his "nonsensical" philosophical elucidations to a ladder that one must throw away after having "used them as steps to climb beyond them" (idem, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K.Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), Proposition #6.54. Both of these latter statements appear to regard sustained speculation that strives to transcend the limits of language on a meta-philosophical level as a futile enterprise.

[103] See, for example, his defense of Maimonides' incorporation of Aristotelian ideas in his theology in *Maamarei Ha-reayah* 1 (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 105-112.

nature of the form of life that such talk supports? After all is said and done, a narrative approach to Scripture as myth may satisfy the Orthodox requirement to relate to every word of the Torah as equally divine and laden with meaning. Nevertheless, does offering a theory of cumulative revelation that regards such a theology as possible interpretation rather than hard fact amount to anything more than Kaplan's naturalism or Leibowitz's concept of religion as an exclusively man-made choice?

At the end of the road, claims regarding divine messages that surpass the limits of human subjectivity cannot suffice with a more nuanced view of the process by which they are transmitted. Eventually, they must also contend with the very concept of God. So long as a self0aware constructivist speaks of a totally transcendent God, the paradox of talking about this outside reality from within remains. Defending belief in the very possibility of divine speech with more naturalistic contentions regarding the method of its transmission is not enough to break the hermeneutic circle; the general context of our humanity inevitably colors our understanding of any particular experience within it, just as the particularity of our internal experience colors our view of that which lies beyond.*104*

If there is no real sense to speaking of something transcending the universe communicating a message to those who are within (remembering that verbal communication itself is a decidedly human concept), all talk of blurring between the natural and the supernatural in the mechanics of revelation (i.e., God speaking via history and the development of human understanding) does not really help us. In order to support truly metaphysical claims, the very distinction between God's existence and our self-certifying perceptions needs to be overcome.

Christian theologians affected by constructivist views of truth have already produced a considerable literature devoted to this project.[105] Developing a concept of God that responds to this requirement in Jewish

[104] As already remarked by the pre-Socratic philosopher, Xenophones: "But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own – horses like horses, cattle like cattle (Xenophanes, fragment 6) - as quoted in *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy*, edited by Milton C. Nahm (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), p. 109

[105] See, for example, Robert Andrew Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective: Between Realism and Non-Realism* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009); David Ray Griffin, *God & Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Tommi Lehtonen, *After Secularization: A Philosophical Study of the Preconditions of Religion (*Elon: Magnus Publications, 2012); several relevant chapters in *Postmodern Theology*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and in *Walking the Tightrope of Faith: Philosophical Conversations About Reason and Religion*, edited by Hendrik Har, Ronald A. Kuipers and Kai Nielsen (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999); and the many books of Dan Cupitt and John D. Caputo struggling with this issue; see also Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (Valley Forge:Trinity Press, 1996), for a uniquely feminist contribution to this conversation.

terms is an important item on the theological agenda of Modern Orthodoxy. Beyond recent pioneering efforts of the late Rabbi Shagar,[106] I believe that this need is already being addressed intuitively on the ground, where the true destiny of any theology is really determined – in an increased interest in mysticism, in the interconnected nature of all that exists, and in a form of spirituality unmediated by reason and formal institutional structures. This is an issue, however, which deserves further treatment on a more philosophically rigorous theoretical plane, exploiting whatever paradigms Jewish tradition already provides for overcoming the paradoxical outsider-insider hurdle.

In the concluding sections of my paper, I would like to offer one such paradigm which I find particularly promising, because of its ability to suggest a layered view of reality that bridges the gap between inside and outside perspectives: The doctrine of tzimtzum (divine contraction) as developed by the 16th century mystic, R. Isaac Luria, and its allegorical interpretations.

XV – Traditional Concepts of God and Kabbalistic Interpretation: An Overview

The *tzimtzum* paradigm which was developed in kabbalistic writings in the modern period has produced several models that are fruitful for our discussion. Although typically articulated in esoteric terminology far removed from the understanding of the ordinary believer, these models and the theological concept which they share, have exerted much unacknowledged influence on various forms of traditional Jewish belief and practice in modern times.

Common to all of these models is a unique mix of realism and non-realism that transfers the question of God's relationship to the world from the realm of ontology to that of epistemology. In their struggle to acknowledge the mediating role of human perception while at the same time defending a

[106] Despite the fact that R. Shagar did not relate, to the best of my knowledge, to questions arising from biblical criticism specifically, the extent of his engagement with the challenges of postmodern thinking has become increasingly evident with the gradual publication of his posthumous legacy. See, for example, *Kelim Shevurim: Torah ve-Ziyonut Datit Be-seviva Postmodernit*, edited by Odeyah Tzurieli (Efrat: Hemed, 2013): "Faith and Language according to the Alter Rebbe of Habad from the Perspectived of Wittgenstein's philosophy of Language" (Hebrew), *On Faith" Studies on the Concept of Faith and its development in Jewish Tradition* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), pp. 365-387. For a comparison between his approach and mine with regard to postmodernism, see: Miriam Feldman-Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology in a Postmodern Age: A Comparative Study of Professor Tamar Ross and Harav Shagar (Shimon Gershon Greenberg)", PhD thesis, submitted to Haifa University, July 2012.

view that makes claims upon how "faith in God" should be conducted in actual practice, I believe these models have much to offer in resolving the self-aware constructivist's theological dilemma. But this potential is best appreciated against the background which led to their formation.

In the popular image, Judaism is customarily viewed as the classical prototype of theistic religious belief, picturing God in personalistic terms as a superior Other who stands over and above the world. Nonetheless, even a cursory survey of Jewish thought over the ages problematizes this conception, beginning with biblical images of God as dwelling and controlling the world from within as well. The occasional rabbinic references to divine immanence fortifies this more nuanced picture.[107] It appears safe to say that traditional Judaism has consistently resisted any strict form of deism[108] which contends that God created the world, but abstains from any subsequent functional contact with it,as well as versions of extreme pantheism, according to which the world and God are one.[109]. Beyond this, however, the trajectory of Jewish theology might be more accurately depicted as a restless zigzag, persistently seeking - as it were - to accurately calibrate a precise Archimedean point between the classical theistic picture and a more panentheistic model, which contends that the world exists *within* God, but that God is *more* than the world.

If the influence of Aristotelian rationalism and Maimonides' negative theology moved biblical and Rabbinic theism to even greater extremes of transcendence and distance from human affairs, the group of medieval Jewish kabbalists merging gnostic themes in classical Jewish mysticism with neo-Platonic notions swung the pendulum in the opposite direction. This group developed an almost dualistic vision of the deity, which distinguished between God as He is in Himself, and God in His manifestations.[110]

According to this conception, the *Ein sof* (or Infinite One) is so unfathomable that this aspect of God is not even mentioned in the Torah.

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[107] Such as the statement that "God is the place of the world, but the world is not the place of God" (*Bereshit Rabba*, 68:9), which appear to expand upon the words of the prophet that "the earth is filled with His glory" (*Isaiah* 6:3).

[108] Beyond that of the proverbial watchmaker who controls the creation through the original implanted mechanism.

[109] The German philosopher, Schopenhauer, wryly described this view as "polite atheism"; Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paraliponema* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970), pp. 217-218.

[110] For further explication of this amalgam in the kabbalistic concept of God, see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar:An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford:Littman, 1989), part I, chapter 2; Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), Sixth Lecture.

God in God's manifestations, by contrast, is the God of religion, who created the world in an emanative process, whereby a series of increasingly material and particularized reflections of God's essence emerged in linear fashion from their source, in a process similar to the earthly phenomenon of birth.

While this two-tiered view allowed the Kabbalists to protect God's transcendence and inscrutability even more zealously than Maimonides on the one hand, it nevertheless moved traditional monotheism closer to pantheism on the other, allowing them to depict God's various manifestations in decidedly worldly terms, as partaking in all aspects of human vulnerability and need.

A significant new twist to the trajectory between immanence and transcendence was introduced with the 16th century doctrine of *Tzimtzum* as developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria. In contrast to his medieval predecessors who carefully avoided any reference to process within the *Ein sof* itself, Luria allowed himself to violate this original taboo. He suggested that just as any living organism must inhale before exhaling, or break open its shell in order to reveal the kernel of fruit within, so too must the emanative process of creation be preceded by an act of contraction on the part of the *Ein sof* in order to create space for a finite worldly reality that is other than God.

The substance of creation emanates – as in classical Kabbala – in the form of a gradually diminishing ray of light stemming from the *Ein sof* itself. This would ostensibly lead Lurianic kabbala to reiterate a panentheistic picture of God-world relations. Nevertheless, the fact that this ray of light is clearly demarcated from the *Ein sof* by the circle of empty space – or *Tzimtzum* - surrounding it, enabled a partial return to theism. Even within this more circumscribed stance, greater fine-tuning of the pantheistic-theistic spectrum was engendered by Luria's students, who exhibited varying degrees of interest in preserving substantive differences between the *Ein sof* and the finite world of creation which emerged out of the void.[111] For our purposes, however, this brief historical sketch of Jewish vacillation between theism and

[111] Thus, for example, R. Hayim Vital displays interest in downplaying pantheistic motifs, by portraying the act of *Tzimtzum* as an act of free will and the resultant void as absolutely clean of the original divine presence. R. Israel Sarug, by contrast, depicts *Tzimtzum* as an involuntary act of catharsis prompted by the need to rid the divine life of the roots of evil and limitation. Sarug introduces the notion of the *reshimu* – a residue of the original unpurified divine reality which inevitably remained in the void, much as drops of oil cling to the sides of an emptied vessel. It is from this residue that vessels were formed, in order to contain and delineate the subsequent emanations of divine light that, at its end point, constitute our this-worldly reality. For a more detailed description, see: *Encylopedia Judaica*, *Kabbala*, p. 590; Isaiah Tishby, *Torah ha-Ra ve-hakelippa be-Kabbalat ha-Ari* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 25

panentheism is merely the preamble to a far more rarefied development in our theological odyssey, which stemmed from a significant 18th century offshoot of Lurianic Kabbala. This offshoot has yielded several highly sophisticated models of God and His relationship to the world that might be very fruitful for our discussion.

XVI – The Doctrine of *Tzimtzum shelo kepshuto* and its Power

R. Isaac Luria was primarily a visionary. The power of his mythic teachings lay in their symbolic ramifications rather than in their discursive logic. Nevertheless, some of his more philosophically inclined students queried the viability of *Tzimtzum* when taken literally.[112]

Luria may have couched his description of divine contraction with repeated caveats of "as if" and "as it were" (*kivyakhol)*, acknowledging that all talk of movement and change in the *Ein sof* refers to spiritual rather than physical processes. This, however, did not dispel the qualms of some of Luria's disciples regarding the very legitimacy of speaking of a "before" and "after" when referring to a timeless deity, or of attributing to such a sublimely spiritual Being any element of change. Others also raised doubts regarding the possibility of any space that could be emptied of God's infinite and all-pervading presence. Such reservations led to the development of what eventually became known in the secondary literature as "the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*", (or as the kabbalists themselves termed it: *Tzimtzum shelo kepshuto*).

According to the first expositors of *Tzimtzum shelo kepshuto*, the original Lurianic doctrine of *Tzimtzum* should not be understood literally as a real displacement and the creation of an actual void within the *Ein-sof*, but rather as the establishment of a world of appearances, in which God's infinity is represented in finite proportions capable of being grasped by finite minds. According to this understanding, God's monolithic unity before creation and after creation remains exactly the same; ontologically nothing has changed. But as a result of the spontaneous activity of the divine life, there ensued a covering over or concealment of some aspect of God's all-pervasive presence, thereby engendering an illusory realm of appearance. This so-called metaphoric "withdrawal" enables the epistemological distinction between subject and object, creator and created being, perceiver and perceived, and

[112] For an initial formulation of this interpretation, see Joseph Ergas, *Shomer Emunim* (Hebrew), second polemic, pp. 34, 39

allows various elements of God's infinity to view themselves as separate entities, despite the fact that ontologically they remain merged with the whole.

By way of illustration, the act of divine tzimtzum was likened by some to the situation of a teacher who conceals the full scope of his knowledge so that some limited portion of it may be revealed to his student. Just as the wisdom of the teacher is unaffected by this concealment, so too all forms of existence gain a sense of their selfhood as a result of the hiding of God's all-pervasive presence, yet God's all-embracing monolithic unity remains the same. All appearances of diversity and particularization – while real enough - are swallowed up by His infinite unity, just as drops of water are contained by the sea and indistinguishable from the surrounding waters.

While the allegorical interpretation of *Tzimtzum*, and its sharp swing to a position of near-pantheism, once again served to resolve difficulties of a theological nature, it raised new religious problems on a more practical plane. Proponents of this view might easily conclude that if all that distinguishes between Creator and created being is the illusion of selfhood, truly the unity between man and God is but a hair's breadth away. All that is required is a switch of consciousness, and voila - *unio mystica* is achieved!

In contradistinction to this tantalizing possibility, one of the natural corollaries of Jewish monotheism and God's transcendence is the notion of divine command. Conceiving of God as a Supreme Being who reveals the divine will in the form of concrete laws encourages the sanctification of a this-worldly ethic as the most sublime expression of worship. A life of law, however, mandates the premise of a diversified, multifarious world, differentiating between holy and profane, good and evil, and recognizing a hierarchy of clearly distinct entities and values. This stands in sharp contrast to the mystic understanding of God as an infinite, monolithic unity in which all binaries are dissolved.

In response to this threat of anti-nomism, there arose amongst Lithuania Jewry of the 18th and 19th century two new developments of Lurianic Kabbala, which on the one hand accepted the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* but on the other hand strove to stem its nihilistic effects. I refer here to the Hassidic movement, particularly in its *Habad* version - as developed by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and to the ideology of its opponents, the *Mitnagdim,* as explicated by R. Hayim of

Volozhin, one of the most prominent disciples of R. Elijah Kremer, the Gaon of Vilna.[113]

The bitter exchanges between the leaders of both movements have already become legion in the annals of Jewish history and to some extent continue to this day. What is less popularly known is that the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* were in fundamental agreement with regard to their central theological conception, illustrating the fact that minor differences between protagonists sharing a basically similar worldview are often experienced far more acutely than the differences between camps that are farther removed.

Common to both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* was the notion of three levels of consciousness, which in effect represent three levels of existence. The first, or highest level, which I will dub Stage One, consists of all that there is, and as such, defies definition. Even the attribute "God" as applied here is inadequate, as this would imply comparison with something else. From the vantage point of creation as a separate entity, however, two other levels of perception can be spoken of. Stage Two seeks to describe how we, as perceiving creatures, imagine that God relates to the world from God's point of view (*mitzido).* In other words, Stage Two explores how we might articulate the essentially ineffable reality of Stage One in words. Finally, Stage Three defines how we, as perceiving creatures, see God's relationship to the world from our point of view (*mitzideinu*).

The *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* agreed (with a few reservations) regarding the ineffability of Stage One.[114] They also agreed that Stage Two (how we, from our illusory vantage point of separate existence, conceptualize God's relationship to the world from God's point view) is essentially a position of semi-acosmic pantheism. What this term means to convey is that if we stretch our imaginations beyond the limits of our perception, we can hypothetically posit that from God's point of view, God's existence is all-inclusive, so that from God's perspective, there *is* no reality other than God.

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[113] For primary sources explicating the allegorical interpretation of *Tzimtzum*, as applied in Habad Hassidic and Mitnaggedic ideology, see *Likkutei Amarim (Hebrew)* by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi and *Nefesh Ha-hayim* (Hebrew) by R. Hayim of Volozhin, respectively. For further discussion of the two views, see Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 79-91 and Norman Lamm, *Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Hoboken: Ktav/Yeshiva University, 1989). Regarding finer points of difference between them, see Tamar Ross, "Two Interpretations of the Doctrine of Zimzum: Hayim of Volozhin and Shneur Zalman of Lyadi", *Mehkarei Yerushalayim B'machshevet Yisrael* (Hebrew) 2, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 153-169.

[114] For explication of these subtle differences, see Ross, "Two Interpretations", ibid, pp. 159-162.

The main point of difference between the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim,* was their understanding of Stage Three - how we perceive God's relationship to the world from our point of view. Since it is this perspective that dictates the nature and ultimate objective of religious worship, one may readily understand why this difference was the cause of the great acrimony that ensued between the two movements.

According to R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, although the light of the *Ein sof* fills all worlds so that nothing is void of God's presence, the concealment of that light in our this-worldly reality is also absolute. The very delineation of our world (in contradistinction to God) renders the derivative ray of light which sustains it as qualitatively different in essence from the monolithic unity from which it stems. For this reason, God's reality from our point of view is not only "more", but also "other" in substance. Precisely because nothing of God's absolute and infinite unity filters down to our world, the highest object of the religious life is to pierce our illusory sense of separate existence, and merge – to whatever extent possible – with that undifferentiated unity which is God's. This is accomplished by drawing that unity into this world, [115] eradicating its "reality" by eradicating our false sense of independent selfhood. The life of *halakha*, which combines spirit and matter in the study of Torah and performance of *mitzvot*, is an important tool in this endeavor, but its ultimate arena is the world at large.

R. Hayim of Volozhin, by contrast, contended that the distancing of our world from God's monolithic unity via the metaphoric act of withdrawal is actually a dual process. The hiding of God's infinity is indeed a result of the metaphoric act of *tzimtzum.* Nevertheless, the fact that the derivative ray of light emanating from that infinity appears to us as a plurality of descending gradations is not due to any essential property of the ray itself (whose concealment could, in principle, also appear as "uniform in all places") but rather to the manner in which it is perceived. [116] Hence, while the substantive relationship between God's absolute existence and any aspect of our created remains, we both "cannot and are also forbidden" to dwell upon the "awesome matter" of God's all-pervasive presence". [117] Rather than strive for

[115] It is important to note that even in his most pantheistic formulations, R. Shneur Zalman applied brakes to the unio mystica ideal, by distinguishing between drawing the original divine light into this world and immersion in its Source, regarding the latter possibility as beyond the pale – see Ross, "Two Interpretations" (supra, n. 113), p. 165

[116] *Nefesh Ha-hayim*, *Shaar gimmel*, chapter 7

[117] *Nefesh Ha-hayim*, *Shaar gimmel*, chapter 6

dramatic shifts in consciousness on the earthly plane, the task of the faithful is to worship God in accordance with reality as it appears to us, confident that through the study of Torah and practical observance of *halakha* we fortify the ontological connection between the final and lowest point of God's manifestation in this world and its infinite source. R. Hayim of Volozhin likens awareness of the higher dimension of reality to embers of fire; as background warmth such knowledge can serve a positive function in fueling our devotion, but if approached too closely we face the danger of being consumed.[119]

What may appear to lay eyes as abstruse theological nitpicking is actually a serious attempt on the part of both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* to overcome a tension even more evident than in classical Kabbala between the conflicting religious sensibilities of pantheism and theism. Both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* do this by developing a very intricate and finely tuned conceptual scheme that will allow these two incompatible bedfellows to somehow lie peacefully together. Emphasis on various forms of distinction between God's point of view and ours enabled them to hold on to the view of the unlimited reality, which is God's, without the threat to normative *halakha* which acceptance of God's ultimate unity would seem to entail.

More significant for our purposes, however, is the fact that in spelling out this version of the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, both the *Mitnagdim* and the *Hassidim* appropriate in Kabbalistic idiom a critical/subjectivist theory of knowledge which bears striking similarity to Kant's "Copernican" revolution in the realm of epistemology, as referred to above.[120]

As already noted by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook,[121] the distinction that the allegorical interpreters of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* made between God's

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[119] *Nefesh ha-Hayim*, Shaar gimmel, chapter 4; see also ibid, chapter 8

[120] "The trading of the medieval notion that man's perceptions revolve around some fixed reality, for the modern notion that this reality, far from being fixed, is filtered and shaped by the mind perceiving it"- supra section 8. It is instructive to note that Immanuel Kant was born in 1724, a year before R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and twenty-five years before the birth of R .Hayim of Volozhin, providing room for speculation regarding shared sources of inspiration.

[121] See *Iggrot ha-Reayah* I (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), pp. 47-48, where R. Kook applies this observation to the Kabbala at large, declaring: "It is true, and we [Jews] have always known it – and we did not need Kant to reveal this secret to us – that all human cognitions are relative and subjective." Kook then proceeds to interpret the significance of *Malkhut*, (the lowest of the ten sefirotic manifestations of *Ein Sof*, which is depicted by classical Kabbala as an empty vessel that bears no light of its own), as corresponding to the function of Kant's categories of thought in mediating and filtering raw experience. For closer analysis of this passage and its claims, see Tamar Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi A.I. Kook and Postmodernism", in *Hazon*

point of view and ours served for these latter-day Kabbalists much the same function that the distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenal world did for Kant.[122] There is, however, one critical difference. Whereas Kant was uncertain with regard to the nature of the noumenon, the skepticism of the latter day Kabbalists was directed towards the reality of this world and its perceptions. Despite its inherent inscrutability, for the kabbalists, the truth of God's infinite unity constituted the one absolute certainty. As R. Eliyahu Dessler, the 20th century proponent of the modern Musar movement, expressed it:

> The definition of [God's] unique unity expressed as "there is none but Him alone" cannot be grasped inherently from within creation, for this aspect of God's uniqueness implies that creation does not really exist [i.e., "there is *nothing* but Him alone"]. The world was created through [divine self-] contraction and concealment of that truth, and the reality of creation can be perceived only from within creation itself – that is to say, following, and within, that self-contraction – and its reality is only in and of itself, relative to itself……It follows that all our understandings are only relative to creation. They are only within and in respect to creation, in accordance with our concepts, which are also created. We possess only relative truth, each one in accordance with his station and condition.[123]

Under such circumstances, it would appear that not only the reality of creation, but even that of a personal, finite God who reveals Himself to an entity that is other than He, makes sense only from within the concealed and illusory state of *tzimtzum*. Indeed, when relating to the distinction between the Jewish view and that of Kant, R. Kook (whose entire worldview is also predicated on the assumption of *tzimtzum shelo kepshuto*)[124] explicitly debunks the notion of an infinity capable of being grasped (אין סוף מושג) as a logical

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Nahum, edited by Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock, (Hoboken: Ktav/Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 487-488.

[122] In Kant's philosophy, a "noumenon" is the thing in itself, not how it is known by the senses. A "phenomenon", however, is how the object is known or perceived by the senses.

[123] Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* III (London: Honig and Sons, 1955), pp. 256-257

[124] For further amplification, see: "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook" (Hebrew), Part I, *Daat* (Hebrew) 8, Bar Ilan University, Summer 1982, pp. 109-128; Part II, *Daat* Winter 1983, pp. 39-70; "The Lurianic Doctrine of *Tzimtzum* in the Writings of Harav Kook" (Hebrew), in *Mechkarim b'Hagut Yehudit*, edited by Moshe Idel and Sarah Heller-Wilensky (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1989), pp.159-172

contradiction in terms. He goes so far as to claim that this concept could only have stemmed from a descendant of idolaters, such as Kant.[125] Nevertheless, it was precisely their faith in this mystic equation of God with infinity that led the allegorical interpreters of *tzimtzum* to develop a more charitable view of the relationship between language and metaphysics, or human truth-claims and divine reality that is germane to our discussion.

XVII – The Potential Contribution of the Allegorical Interpretation of *Tzimtzum* to the Dilemma of Post-Liberal Theology

If, as implied by the allegorical interpretation of *tzimtzum,* fixating on a fragment of God's revelation is essentially a form of idolatry, what, then, could possibly be the justification for living our lives in accordance with this heresy? In other words, what merit is there to a form of worship that diminishes and distorts the true object of faith by equating it with our limited and subjective perceptions? In continuation of the passage quoted above, R. Dessler provides what might appear to be a half-hearted answer to this question:

> What is the value of a relative perception? Its value lies in its being relative *to us*, in accordance with our situation in this world – the world of free-will and worship; accordingly, *it is the only truth we have...* "You endow man with understanding" – even our perceptions have been created for us and given to us by the Creator, may He be blessed, for purposes of fulfilling our role in this world – *and that is their entire value.*[126]

On the surface it would appear that R. Dessler is merely reiterating Stout's critique of the skeptical realist (as cited above) in religious terms,[127] once again cautioning against striving for the impossible. Yet the facile manner in which Dessler lapses in the concluding sentence of this passage, which emphasizes God's pantheistic acosmism, into to a theistic mode, viewing God as a Creator deliberately fashioning our perceptions, is telling. Fueling his compliance with the inevitable subjectivity and finitude of human perception, it would be safe to conclude, is a layered conception of God which legitimizes the personalist understanding not only because this is all

[125] *Iggrot Reayah* I, 47-48.
[126] Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* III, pp. 257.
[127] Supra, towards the end of section XII.

that we are capable of imagining, but also because it too is ontologically part of that infinite reality which is beyond definition.

More explicit expression of this type of justification is encapsulated in a statement popularly attributed to the charismatic 18th century *Hassidic* teacher, R. Nachman of Breslau, who declared:

> Whenever I think about God, I am at first saddened, because I realize that in thinking about Him, I distance myself from Him. But then I remember that since He is all, He is also my thought and my distance, and I am consoled.[128]

A more philosophical formulation of the same idea appears in a passage by R. Kook, in which he declares:

> Every definition of the divine leads to heresy. Definition is spiritual idolatry… even divinity itself and the name 'God' is definition. And without the supreme knowledge that all these are merely sparkling flashes of what is beyond definition they too would lead to heresy. And for people who have become completely distanced from this original view they indeed do lead to gross heresy.[129]

From here we see that R. Kook, similarly to R. Dessler and R. Nachman, does not denigrate the appeal to imperfect, human theological conceptions. So long as one is careful to distinguish between these limited "awarenesses of the heart" (*hakarot ha-lev)* and their infinite source, while not severing the relationship between "the core of faith" and its "explication", such depictions are worthy of respect and not to be belittled.[130]

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[128] Although I have not succeeded in locating a verbatim source for this statement in the writings of R. Nachman, it does indeed capture and paraphrase some of his teachings. See, for example, the account of the heart of the world and its longing for the well-spring in "The Tale of Seven Beggars" (Hebrew) in his *Sippurei Ma'asiyot,* or his identification of human lack with that of the *Shekhina* [divine presence] (to wit: "might there be any greater honor than this?") his *Likkutei Moharan* (Hebrew) part I, teaching 89.

[129] "Zar'onim", *Orot*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kook, 1963), pp.124-125

[130] For discussion of a comparable attitude to conceptual idolatry in the writings of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica, see Herzl Hefter, "Idolatry: A Prohibition for Our Time", *Tradition* 42:1, 2009, pp. 15-28. See also Robert Merrihew Adams, "Idolatry and the Invisibility of God", in *Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Shlom Biderman & Ban-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden/New York/Koln: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 39-52 for a Christian formulation of the same idea. Both Adams and Hefter relate to theologian Paul Tillich's insistence upon the necessity of broken myths

Applying such insights to a constructivist view of revelation, one might say that the human (or Rabbinic) decision to view the Torah as a direct communication of God to man is to be defended simply because this perception is an element of that ultimate reality itself. Such a defense, however, does not take us very far, for if everything can be validated on the basis of its grounding in some monolithic undefined, all-inclusive and infinite noumenon, how are we to distinguish between revelation and non-revelation, and why prefer *any* truth claim (revelatory or not) over another?

The allegorical interpreters of *tzimtzum* preceding R. Kook do not appear to have been troubled by this specter of relativism, but their assumptions regarding the superior revelatory status of Torah as self-evident merely reflect their personal existential experience or the influence of tradition. R. Kook, however, does attempt to address these questions in a manner that intensifies the intertwining of the subjective and objective dimensions of our God-talk even further.

XVIII – The Problem of Relativism and Rav Kook's Concept of "Perfectible Perfection"

One criterion that can be gleaned from R. Kook's thought for accepting the notion of revelation as a God-driven message is an instrumentalist one, serving decidedly human purposes. R. Kook's personal writings consistently refer to the ultimate object of religion with abstractions, such as "the divine"(*Elohut)*, rather than God *(Elohim)*. He prefers terms like "the highest sanctity", "reason", "*w*ill", "the all-inclusive unity", "the essence of being", "perfection", "the source of the spiritual", etc. He rarely employs more colloquial references to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu,* and *Ribbono Shel Olam* beyond the framework of institutionalized prayer.

Nevertheless, R. Kook explicitly defends the personalist, theistic view of God as an indispensable "chamber and reception hall."[131] In other words, such a view functions as a necessary stepping–stone, eventually leading us to apprehension of an ultimate reality that transcends such distinctions. But another criterion that R. Kook adopts for favoring a dialogic mode of relationship with the divine is more theocentric. This second criterion provides a new twist to the dialectic between outsider and insider perspectives.

[131] A.I. Kook, *Orot ha-kodesh* II, 399-401.

Appropriating *Mitnagdic* "realism" in acknowledging that created beings can never exceed the limitations inherent to our Stage Three sense of selfhood *mitzideinu*, yet unwilling to forgo the *Hassidic* yearning to experience a greater sense of unity with that which lies beyond,[132] R. Kook develops a model of God *mitzideinu* that is necessitated even *mitzido.*

In a seminal passage entitled "The Inhibition of Good and its Purpose" (*Meniat ha-tov u-magamata*), R. Kook begins by introducing a classical theological question: What was God's motive for creation? In consonance with what might be construed as a basically constructivist orientation, R. Kook first takes the wind out of the sails of the very question by pointing out that such a discussion is legitimate only from *our* point of view, since all talk of motive and purpose only makes sense in a world which includes the perception of lack. As he formulates it:

> Every purpose must be preceded by a lack. Therefore, there is no room for querying the purpose of existence without assuming some primordial lack… But at the heart of the matter, we are forced to conclude that our soul's inability to put the riddle of the world's existence to rest and its need to assume some lack (as motive) arises only from the negative aspect of reality, because of the existence of evil in the world. In the context of God's perfect reality, the value of existence is self-evident and requires no justification…"[133]

Thus we must realize from the outset that it is not merely the question that is legitimate only from our point of view, from within the context of human perspectives and concerns (*legabei didan).* [134] By the same token, any response to this question must also be regarded as merely of palliative, explanatory value, because it too relies necessarily on (illusory) assumptions of lack and evil drawn from our imperfect this-worldly experience.[135] In God's

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[132] For more detailed discussion of R. Kook's unique amalgam of *Hassidic* and *Mitnagdic* teachings with regard to the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* and its broader implications, see Tamar Ross, "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook - Part I". *Daat* (Hebrew) 8, Bar Ilan University, Summer 1982, pp. 109-128; "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook - Part II" *Daat* 9 (Hebrew), Winter 1983, pp. 39-70. For a more concise version, see: idem, "The Lurianic Doctrine of Tzimtzum in the Writings of Harav Kook" (Hebrew), in *Mechkarim b'Hagut Yehudit*, edited by Moshe Idel and Sarah Heller-Wilensky (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1989), pp.159-172

[133] *Orot ha-Kodesh* II (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), 464-465.

[134] *Orot ha-kodesh* II, 464-465

[135] *Orot Ha-Kodesh* II, 465

infinite reality, where all possibilities are actualized, both the question and the answer are redundant.

After establishing these caveats (limiting the question to human perspectives and limiting the ability to achieve an adequate response), however, R. Kook is still prepared to discuss the question, recognizing that even an "as if" solution must be formulated in a way that will picture God for us in as dignified and intelligible a manner possible.[136]

He begins this effort by contending that the pantheistic acosmic reality (or *Shlemut)* that we attribute to God from God's point of view must always appear imperfect from the perspective of created beings, because "infinite perfection leaves no room for improvement, or perfectibility "*(Hishtalmut)*.[137] From the point of view of a limited imperfect reality, God's infinite existence lacks the property of lack, which is in effect the necessary impetus for creativity, free will, improvement and growth.[138]

But although as created beings living in a finite world, we can never attain total identification with that infinite state of being, we can - as against this - enhance and improve upon what appears to us as the limitation of its static perfection. We do this by consciously relating the seemingly barren infinity which is God's to the multitude of this-worldly experiences that it generates. Precisely because we are incapable of connecting to God in a manner that renders the divine completely independent of our limited perceptions, we possess the freedom to replicate and infinitely expand upon God's original unity from our point of view via the never-ending dynamic of the world of appearances. The resultant *Shlemut mishtalemet* (perfectible perfection) provides a further intertwining between the objective and subjective point of view.

R. Kook frankly acknowledges that his theology of a perfectible perfection (*Shlemut mishtalemet)*, which views the lack of room for improvement and growth ((*Hishtalmut)* as the cause of creation, is a decidedly human construct. Even when promoting this particular image of the divine *mitzideinu*, he accompanies its endorsement with the telling phrase "we will profit much" by picturing God thusly.[139] It is as if R. Kook were inviting us to his private workshop for the fashioning of theological systems, and frankly

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[136] *Orot Ha-Kodesh* II, 464-465
[137] *Orot Ha-Kodesh* II, 531
[138] See *Orot Ha-kodesh* II, 531, as well as all the other passages appearing in *Orot Ha-Kodesh* II, part 5, which is entitled "Hit'alut Ha-olam".
[139] *Orot ha-kodesh* II, 464-465

laying his cards out on the table. In this maneuver, Rav Kook is essentially weighing up the various answers to a serious theological issue on no more objective grounds than the very anthropocentric consideration of: where will this picture of God's *shlemut* requiring completion in human *hishtalmut* lead to in terms of profit to man?

But even with this R. Kook has not yet played his final hand. Instead, he takes this blurring of boundaries one step further. For Rav Kook, this way of viewing the world was not just a matter of perception. It also had practical implications. Adopting increasingly inclusive models of reality was to his mind a method of "world-making," overcoming the limits of human creativity.

When mind-body, religious-secular, reason-imagination and other such polarities are broken down and viewed as a continuum, phenomena that formerly seemed miraculous might now appear as elements of natural process.[140] All this without diminishing the infinite possibilities of the supernatural still waiting to be discovered.[141]

XIX – Bringing it all Together: The Interactive Paradigm of Divine-Human Relations

Returning to the analogy of our anonymous blogger with regard to religion and the cameraman (supra, part XII), one might say that the difference between the *Hassidic* and the *Mitnagdic* picture of reality from our point of view may be likened to the difference between watching a movie and going to the theater. In a cinema house, the audience sits in total darkness, and the images on the screen bear no real substance. In the theater, the lights are simply dimmed, and on stage stand real people, but they behave differently than in daily life. [142]

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[140] *Arpilei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Ha-machon al shem Harav Zvi Yehuda Koo, 1983), p. 5

[141] For application of this understanding to R. Kook's view of immortality and the potential power of new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between spirit and matter, see Tamar Ross, "Immortality, Natural Law, and the Role of Human Perception in the Writings of Rav Kook", in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, (edited by David Shatz and Lawrence Kaplan, New York University Press, 1995), pp.237-257.

[142] This method of depicting the difference between R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi's view of reality as opposed to that of R. Hayim's has been suggested by Shalom Rosenberg – see his essay, "Kabbalistic Doctrine in *'Nefesh Ha-Hayim'"* (Hebrew), *Shana B'Shana* (Jerusalem: Dept. of Torah Education of the Ministry of Education, 1998), pp. 357-370. Rosenberg applies the comparison in precisely the opposite manner, relating the theater image to the Hassidic view and that of the cinema to the Mitnaggedim. Despite appearances to the contrary, I do not believe that this reflects a basic disagreement between us regarding the nature of the two systems, but rather a difference as to where the definitive point of "hiding" in each of them lies.

Taking this analogy further, R. Kook's attempt at amalgamating the two approaches comes closer to an interactive performance, where audience participation bears critical influence on the outcome of the drama. In this context, our metaphysical constructs are not merely passive descriptions. Instead, they are powerful reality-producing tools that are constantly open to revision in light of their critical effects upon human experience. The "really scary bits" (unpalatable moral messages and others sources of cognitive dissonance), in particular, are occasionally re-interpreted so that the spell of the show upon us will be retained.

Let us revert, now, to our original starting-point, and state the conclusion succinctly. The significance of the allegorical interpretation to the doctrine of *tzimtzum* for views of revelation is that the image of God that it presents allows us to acknowledge the subjective human element not only in the message of the Torah and its method of transmission but in the very conception of divine-human relations. And it does this without forfeiting the "truth" of that perception.

In an illuminating passage relating to the belief in divine revelation, R. Kook writes as follows:

> There is a heresy that amounts to an affirmation of faith, and an affirmation of faith that amounts to heresy. How so? A person may affirm that the Torah is from "heaven," but the picture of "heaven" that he envisions is so weird that nothing of true faith remains. And how might heresy amount to affirmation of faith? [When] a person denies [belief in] Torah from heaven, but his denial is based merely on what he has absorbed of the picture of heaven construed by minds filled with ludicrous and nonsensical thoughts. Such a person says: "The Torah must stem from a source higher than this!" and he begins to find its basis in the grandeur of the spirit of man, in the depth of his morality and in the height of his wisdom. Although such a person may not yet have reached the center point of truth, nonetheless this heresy is akin to affirmation of faith and it progresses towards affirmation of belief at its root… and Torah from Heaven is but an example for all the generalities and particulars of religious doctrine, regarding the relationship between their linguistic expression and their inner essence, [the latter being] the true object of faith.[143]

R. Kook does not bother to spell out what precisely is the "weirdness" of the simple believer's conception of heaven that puts off the heretic. We may readily assume that this objection is based, at least in part, on rejection of some grossly anthropomorphic vision of God and God's methods of revelation. But we may also infer from the heretic's alternative vision that the value R. Kook finds in the heretic's response is not merely its greater philosophical sophistication. It lies also in the heretic's ability to relate God's word to the noblest intuitions and achievements of man, rather than viewing it merely as the dictates of some external force, imposed upon us from without.[144] Only when God and man (אני ואין) are envisioned as two related stages of an infinite continuum is the true object of faith revealed.[145]

Conclusion

The formulations of the allegorical interpreters of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* originated in times, background conditions, and assumptions that are in many ways far removed from our own. Their terms and manner of expression may seem strange and their style of argumentation hard to follow, so that delving into their theological formulations will no doubt appear to some as a rarefied intellectual parlor game with little practical value for post-liberal theories of religious doctrine affected by Wittgenstein's linguistic turn.

Theological visions have a life of their own, however, and a way of filtering down to the popular imagination in times of need. The subjectivist views of God and revelation suggested by latter-day kabbalists, as well as more contemporary versions of the same, have much to contribute to our understanding of halakhic process, proper methods of Torah study, and the transmission of tradition to future generations No doubt there will be much call for fine-tuning and revision once these implications spell themselves out.

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[143] A.I. Kook, *Orot ha-Emunah*, 25

[144] For a slightly different interpretation, suggesting that the superiority of the heretic's relationship to the Torah lies in his ability to appreciate the sublime value of its contents, rather than focusing upon the external circumstances of its transmission, see Amit Kula, Existential or Non-Essential, p. 134.

[145] See in this connection R. Kook's equation of exile and estrangement from God with estrangement from a sense of our authentic selves, in a passage entitled: "The Search for the Essential Self" (Heb.), *Orot ha-Kodesh* III (Jerusalem: Mosad harav Kook, 1985), p. 140, The ending of this passage with the verse "I am the Lord, thy God, who delivers you from Egypt in order to be your God, I am the Lord", referring to this delivery in present tense, suggests an audacious interpretation of the last four words. For expression of similar ideas in a postmodern vein that challenge the focusing of religion on cognitive claims rather than on the way that God (as symbol) is integrally connected with our experience of ourselves and the way we engage with the world, see Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Relating God and the Self: Dynamic Interplay* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

But it is to these theological vistas, rather than the inevitably doomed attempt to defeat the academic world on its own turf by debating "the facts of the matter," that the future of Orthodox responses to the challenges of biblical criticism beckons. Under such circumstances, the bounds of Orthodoxy will be determined not by any stable, precise and definitive understanding of the metaphysical basis for the doctrines it assumes, but rather by the role that this understanding plays in the life of its adherents.

Excursus – Wittgenstein's Anti-Scientistic Conception of Philosophy: Two Stages

Throughout his career, Wittgenstein held an anti-scientistic conception of philosophy. Rather than yielding a theory of any kind, Wittgenstin viewed the purpose of philosophy as diagnostic - providing us with an understanding of language that would suffice to break the spell that a misleading picture of its workings might at some particular spot exert upon us by shifting it to a new terrain.

This view of philosophy as conceptual therapy played itself out, however, in two distinct stages. When Wittgenstein first initiated what has come to be known as the "linguistic turn" in philosophy[146], he understood the primary function of language as implying a logical structure which mirrors, or "pictures" in speech, the structure of the external reality (or "fact") which is being described. This mirroring is analogous, somewhat, to the notes of a musical score that represent the relationships between sounds (high, low, forte, etc.).

This meant that only cognitive statements that can be verified or falsified by reference to empiric data (such as "the snow is white") are, in fact, the legitimate concern of philosophy. Since metaphysics, by contrast, as well as aesthetics, ethics, and even philosophy (in the traditional sense of theorizing about the "problems of life") do not deal with empirically observable data, any cognitive statements made in these realms have no meaning in the above sense and are therefore "nonsense".

In his later work[147], Wittgenstein continued to view philosophy as conceptual therapy, but his method for dissolving the systemic confusions

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[146] See his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
[147] See his *Philosophical Investigations*

that stand in the way of our understanding radically changed. His main point now was that one cannot look at the representational dimension of language alone and expect to understand what meaning is. Instead, he regarded all linguistic statements as acquiring meaning only by virtue of their use in a particular context. Language does not serve the same purpose in all contexts and there are many more kinds of things than facts that can be said.

To illustrate the diversity of discourse, Wittgenstein introduced the concepts of “language games” and “forms of life.” The different functions or substructures of language were now understood as comprising different “language games.” Such “games” are essentially goal-directed social activities for which words are just so many tools to get things done in accordance with the "grammar" of their distinctive context. They are not references to fixed and eternal components presented in a logical structure.

Each language game does a particular job, conveying certain meanings to those who participate in its particular discourse. Justification is internal to the activity of "form of life" concerned. For example, if I say: "The house is on fire," this may be a descriptive statement in one set of circumstances, a practical joke in another, and a call to action in a third.

Given this insight, Wittgenstein gave up his earlier theory about meaning. He no longer viewed language as mirroring reality in its logical structure, but rather as functioning in a particular way in accordance with the relevant activity of its speakers in their manner of interaction with their surroundings. It is only when we get different types of discourse mixed up with one another that we are led to blunders and confusion, delegitimizing statements that may be perfectly valid in their particular sphere.

Although Wittgenstein wrote very little about religion, his scattered remarks on the subject inspired many attempts to approach its perplexities in a fresh and revolutionary manner. Most of these interpretive projects still reflect the contours of debate set by Wittgenstein's earlier views. As such, their primary concern is to defend religion against the threat of empiricism and the need for verification by emphasizing the difference between statements of fact and statements of value.

On this view, religious truth statements may indeed be regarded as false or nonsensical if we insist upon understanding them as literal or even figurative representations of an external reality, but can be validated when understood existentially as referring to a level of meaning relating to the inner life of the believer. Ignoring Wittgenstein's suggestion that "what can be said

at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence,"[148] religious existentialists following this path continue to speak metaphysically. They argue that in order for a statement to qualify as religious, its metaphysical dimensions must understood as referring to precisely those subjective, personal, non-cognitive and intuitive aspects that the empiricists reject.

Indeed, most interpreters of Wittgenstein are of the opinion that even in his earlier writings, he did not mean to reject religion and metaphysics altogether. On the contrary: it was precisely because he was convinced that these areas – though not capable of ordinary linguistic expression – were of great importance in the life of man that he was led to his understanding of religious statements as relating to the mystic realm of the ineffable, beyond the reach of language.

Wittgenstein's later thought, however, which related the meaning of propositional statements to language games and forms of life has produced even more interesting and fruitful tools for validating religious doctrine. In rejecting a perception of language as a detached, logical sort of picturing of the facts, and injecting, instead, a concern for its pragmatic dimensions in supporting a "form of life," Wittgenstein's revised version of the relationship between language games and forms of life paved the way for an understanding of religious truth claims that abandons the duality of "facts" and "values" altogether.

Rather than establishing metaphysical facts or existential truths, religious language was now understood as a long-established manner of discourse that does a particular set of jobs, imparting its own particular “form of life” to those who participate in its “language game.” On this view, participants employing religious discourse are engaging a system of symbols that legitimate their most basic patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior.

This “form of life”, however, is not merely a set of practices. It also constructs a “picture” of reality that shapes and produces profound sentiments, attitudes, and awarenesses. Thanks to their hidden emotional power, the images, rituals and practices that this picture engenders can also perform more educational and psychological tasks, and shape social realities via their distinctive religious vocabulary.

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[148] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7

One important conclusion of this new perception of religious language is that the test of religious propositions is not the extent of their correspondence to any given reality. As opposed to conservative apologists (who still strive to find and defend the meaning of religious doctrine and narrative with reference to an external reality), or to religious existentialists (who justify the persistence of questionable religious truth claims by relegating them to a more spiritual and subjective realm), theologians adopting this constructivist approach to religious truth locate its import and significance in what it engenders rather than on what it reflects.

The justification of such discourse is internal and based on the role that it fulfills in the life of the believer, creating a unique cultural-linguistic universe, within which it makes sense to live the life of faith. In other words, rather than conveying metaphysical truths, the ultimate significance of religious language is to provide us with a context and world view that enables their formulation.