

Jerome Yehuda Gellman. *This Was From God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016. 222 pp. \$72 (hbk).*

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Yehuda Jerome Gellman is one of the few philosophers in the analytic tradition working on Jewish philosophical topics. He has also integrated continental and Jewish topics¹. Gellman is a versatile, original and insightful thinker. His new book displays all these virtues too, and is elegantly written, clear and organized well. It is excellent. Whether it is also plausible is a harder question.

The book is an unorthodox defense of orthodox Judaism—or at least something near enough, or at least something near enough to near enough. The immediate audience will likely be small: the kind of modern orthodox Jews with questions about science and religion—especially about the tension between historical discoveries and Jewish historical narratives, and contemporary moral fashions and orthodox Jewish law. The book then comes somewhat in the spirit of Maimonides, and is a promise of a guide for today's perplexed.

The less immediate audience will be large: anyone interested in tensions between science and religion. Christian philosophers and theologians might find the maneuvers here transferable to their own tradition, and Gellman's arguments pertinent. The book will not convert non-Jewish readers to Judaism; there is not much positive argument for Judaism, and nothing for Judaism over Christianity or Islam. Indeed, much of the book attacks the more positive case for Judaism.

The Introduction sets out the broadly theological context of the rest of the book as well as a criterion for the success of the project. The context is a realist view of religious language and knowledge—theological views in the opposite direction being hopelessly implausible, and metaphysical views in the opposite direction being implausible. The more positive proposal is a sketch of how religious language works—a

* Forthcoming in the *Journal of Analytic Theology*.

¹ In e.g. Gellman, J. 2003. *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hassidim on the Binding of Isaac*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

middle way between apophaticism and anthropopathism. If, as I believe, this is the subject of Gellman's next book, then that book should be a groundbreaking contribution to philosophy of religion.

The "Satisfaction Criterion" Gellman promises will be satisfied by his proposal runs as follows:

A contemporary approach to traditional Judaism must leave one with a good religious reason to make great personal sacrifices for the sake of his or her Judaism and to teach one's children (and others, when relevant) to make similar sacrifices. (p. 13)

Some contemporary approaches to Judaism satisfy this condition, while others do not. Many ultra-orthodox Jews, as their ancestors before them, would rather die than relinquish their religion. But Gellman does not set the bar as high as this. He returns to the criterion at only two points in the book (p. 159 and p. 202, the last page of the last chapter).

Next, Chapter 1 neatly sets up the challenge: displaying how contemporary science and historical scholarship are at odds with orthodox Jewish views on the historicity of the Torah's narrative (e.g. the creation, flood and exodus) and its divine authorship respectively. The next three chapters respond to three religious ways of dealing with these problems. The chapter might have distinguished the kinds of genre that can be at odds with science in a problematic way; for example, the religious reader need not be perturbed where poetry is at odds with science. In any case, much of the Torah's narrative looks to be of a historical genre that can be at odds with science in a problematic way.

Chapter 2 distinguishes the "Hard Faith-Response" and the "Soft Faith-Response" to the problem. The Hard Faith-Response sees the conflict between contemporary scholarship and religious tradition, and answers simply: so much the worse for contemporary scholarship. Gellman argues—with a brief but sensitive treatment of rationality—that this kind of response can be rational for certain believers under certain conditions. Such believers are not his intended audience.

The Soft Faith-Response tries to harmonize contemporary scholarship and religion. It sees the evidence of contemporary scholarship, but denies that this evidence demonstrates the secular *conclusions*. Gellman objects that his audience will first need a reason for favoring the religious interpretations over the secular ones, especially when the attempts to harmonize become outlandish. As we will see, Gellman's own proposal might face the same kind of problem.

Gellman recognizes that some of the conflicts will be much harder to harmonize than others, but I don't think he goes far enough. We might distinguish between "Hard Science Conflicts" and "Soft Science Conflicts". Religious believers should take physics much more seriously than historical scholarship. The point brings us to the apologetic response treated in Chapter 3.

The apologetic response meets the skeptic on their own grounds. For example, apologists challenge skeptical scholars by picking out alternative scholars who support the historicity of the Torah. Gellman objects that the apologists "are not in a position to judge whether the scholars they cite have indeed *succeeded* in proving their views, or even whether their argument is to be considered from a scholarly point of view" (p. 59).

There are at least two replies to this objection, both are about how seriously we should take different kinds of science. The first reply is that the apologist might still appeal to distinguished scholars to show that the field is in disarray, even if not to show that the skeptical scholars are mistaken. The second reply is that apologists might be entitled to verdicts about scholarship, even as amateurs. Debates about different interpretations of quantum physics are not for amateurs. But the historical scholarship is far less technical, and far more accessible.

Mercifully, Gellman does not argue from biblical criticism against the divine authorship of the Torah. Indeed, he points out that the field of biblical criticism is in disarray, and criticizes Mordechai Breuer, an orthodox biblical scholar, for depending on the documentary hypothesis. In my experience, many in Gellman's audience will nevertheless be troubled by literary evidence taken to show multiple authorship of the Torah.

Here my points apply with force. The relevant kind of biblical scholarship looks like pseudo-science to me. I don't know where to begin, and so I won't. Christian

readers of this journal might be familiar with e.g. David Johnson's treatment of skeptical biblical scholarship on the New Testament². My views are quite like his—but on the Old Testament and more extreme. Here we do not have to be scholars of the subject to be skeptical about it. Philosophers in particular might be *better* placed to assess an entire subject than those ensconced in it; philosophers of science will be in the best position to distinguish science from pseudo-science. This verdict might hurt the feelings of some readers, if they took me seriously enough. Lawrence Krauss often hurts my feelings about philosophy, but it wasn't hard not to take him seriously.

Gellman further objects that “the scholars people cite in favor of the tradition never... agree with the tradition” (p. 60). Gellman points to such examples as Umberto Cassuto and Robert Alter. The apologists' favorite scholars, whether religious or not, reject orthodox tradition about the authorship of the Torah, as well as its historicity in various details. The apologists might do better to keep their distance.

To be sure, since this is not a technical science they might try appealing to the evidence and reasons their favorite scholars provide, instead of simple name-dropping. If the scholars provide good evidence against certain skeptical conclusions, then these conclusions should be rejected. But if they then argue for *other* skeptical conclusions, the evidence for those should be evaluated in turn, and might turn out to be weak. The evidence will often be weak, since it's harder to construct than to destruct. For example, the evidence Cassuto³ provides against the documentary hypothesis is much more powerful than the evidence he provides in favor of his own theory. This again will be more of a destructive than constructive effort. To show that the the various hypotheses are false is not to show that the traditional view is true.

Gellman next points to various problems for the apologists raised by their favorite archeologists. Finally, he explains how the convergence of the biblical narrative and archeological discovery does not support the historicity of the narrative nearly as strongly as the apologists propose.

Chapter 4 is devoted to attacking a positive argument for the historicity of the Torah: the *Kuzari argument* (due, at the latest, to Saadya Gaon and Yehuda Halevi).

² See Johnson, D. 2004. *Truth Without Paradox*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, ch. 5

³ Cassuto, U. 2008. *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*. Jerusalem: Shalem College.

The argument, very roughly, is that that the exodus from Egypt and revelation at Sinai, et al, must have happened because it would be near impossible to convince an entire nation of miracles about all their own ancestors. Imagine trying to convince all Australians that their ancestors arrived by swimming from Durban to Perth.

Gellman rightly points out that this argument is equally available to Jews as to Christians. Yet most readers of this journal will likely think it is a silly argument. Gellman too thinks it fails, and levels quite a few objections. But I think that it's a clever argument—I just don't have the space here to spell out the details—and that Gellman's objections fail.

For example, Gellman parodies the Kuzari argument: the same kind of reasoning could be used to support the historicity of the public miracles described by the Lotus Sutra. The objection will depend in part on whether Buddhists have interpreted the Lotus Sutra in the same kind of way orthodox Jews interpret the miracles of the exodus—as essential and literal. The objection will also depend on whether orthodox Jews cannot accept the narrative of the Lotus Sutra, and Buddhists the miracles of the exodus. The answers aren't obvious to me.

Gellman does level many further objections. However, even if the Kuzari argument falters, it is not the only or even the main positive case for the historicity of the Torah. Gellman's treatment is a little incomplete. Orthodox Jewish apologists have variously pointed to the fulfilment of unlikely prophecies in the Torah, or its contribution to ideas and ideals, or even literary features discovered by Michael Ber Weismandl⁴. These may only indirectly support the historicity of the Torah: the prophecies or contributions are more likely if the Torah is from God; and, if it is from God, then it is likely historical.

Of course, if Gellman had dealt with all of this, I'd be complaining that the book is too long. Furthermore, he is not denying the historicity of the Torah generally. He is denying that it can be defended as entirely historical truth in all its details. But if the Torah can be shown in any of the above ways to be from God, then it *might* be more likely that it is true in all its historical details. This will depend on questions about the genre of the narratives, and whether God would have to tell the truth. This is something

⁴ See Weismandl, H.M.D. 1958. *Torat Hemed*. Mount Kisco: Yeshiva Press, e.g. pp. 49-50.

Gellman briefly answers in the negative elsewhere⁵, and it would be useful to bring such considerations to bear here again. The overall project would benefit from consideration of more of the arguments that the Torah is from God, especially if it did show as much without showing that all the details are true—for reasons given at the end of this review.

Chapter 5 begins the more constructive theological project: a model of moderate providence that allows for both bottom-up human action and top-down divine action. The model is illustrated beautifully with an example of some pretty intelligent flour poured into a bowl: even if each grain of flour has a little free will about where it will settle, the baker sets the broader boundaries for its position. God can exercise providence without fixing every detail. The model allows for God to intervene in a scientific order, and Gellman defends divine intervention against various kinds of naturalism and scientism.

Chapter 6 explores how divine revelation might be adjusted to frail human intellects and morals. Gellman cites various classical, medieval and modern Jewish commentators to the effect that the Torah is sometimes tailored in this way—especially when it comes to anthropomorphic language and the sacrificial cult. The Torah need not then speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

On anthropomorphic language, it strikes me as implausible to take this as a concession to ancient anthropomorphic tendencies. Would ancient Israelites really have found so much difficulty in a non-anthropomorphic understanding of God? After all, most Jewish children today can understand that God has no body. Indeed, does the Torah not imply that God is incorporeal in various places? In any case, it strikes me more as pretty poetry or easy mnemonic or theologically significant than as divine concession.

On the sacrificial cult, it strikes me as implausible to take this as a mere concession to ancient preferences. After all, so much of the Torah and rabbinic tradition is devoted to it, its cessation in exile is taken to be a disaster, and its reinstatement in better times is promised. Far from an accommodation, this looks like an *ideal*. The chapter ends with a delightful idea from R. Kook towards vegetarianism. Yet, again, it strikes me as implausible to take the Torah as making concessions, especially given the

⁵ See Gellman, J. 1997. *Experience of God and the Rationality of Religious Belief*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 97-9.

sacrificial cult⁶. Generally, the Torah has no trouble in forbidding many things that would have been convenient.

Much in this chapter reminds me of ideas from Christian authors on related topic, such as Peter van Inwagen's essay on Genesis and evolution⁷. Gellman identifies some relevant and fine distinctions in the Jewish sources that might be of interest to Christian readers too.

Chapter 7 brings together the negative case against historicity in the first part of the book and the positive case for divine accommodation in the second: the perplexed Jew can at once accept the Torah as divine revelation and reject it as historically accurate. Indeed, the message God gives us through scientific discoveries is that the Torah is to be read non-historically. The chapter outlines how various traditional Jewish sources point to non-historical readings, and considers objections against the proposal. For all that, the proposal is a radical departure with the Torah's constant emphasis on history and remembrance; I suppose the answer is that the Jewish tradition could not have preserved itself until this juncture without such emphasis.

Chapter 8 ties the proposal to Jewish history and rabbinic tradition—which are also miraculous and from heaven. For reasons that will become clear shortly, the tiny footnote 2 seems to me of potential importance to the project: “With all of the suffering of the Jewish people, or because of it, their continued existence is a part of a colossal miracle” (p. 149). The chapter carefully distinguishes the proposal developed from the views of Norman Solomon and Benjamin Sommer. Gellman's proposal is at once more plausible and closer to Jewish tradition.

Chapter 9 shows how the proposal can draw from non-historical readings of the Torah, particularly from the Hassidic masters—even while these commentators accepted the historicity of the Torah. Gellman displays non-historical readings at work, as they push us toward self-transformation and self-transcendence—towards a deeper love of others. These interpretations also apply to what are, from a modern perspective, morally problematic texts. Gellman's book is not detached theology: he is

⁶ For an account of sacrifices as no mere concession, see Lebens, S. & Goldschmidt, T. 2017. 'The Promise of a New Past', *Philosophers Imprint*, 17, 5, 1-25.

⁷ Van Inwagen, P. 1995. 'Genesis and Evolution' in *God, Knowledge and Mystery*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 128-62.

recommending not only a creative re-reading, but a morally demanding creative re-reading.

I wonder what need there is for this kind of reading of the Torah when the same morals can be recommended more directly by Jewish ethical (*mussar*) literature: Why read the Torah at all anymore? I suppose the answer is, partly, in terms of the psychological power of narrative (illustrated e.g. on pp. 186-7).

Chapter 10 explains why Jews should continue to follow the Torah's commandments—since they are from God, and “constitute *concrete enactments of the Torah narratives*” (p. 196) that deepen our moral commitments. Gellman also considers how Jewish tradition has tempered what modern readers might take to be morally problematic commandments (e.g. to execute the daughter of a priest for sexual misconduct that shames her father). The suspension of such commandments in part results from the destruction of the Temple. This is a little at odds with the Jewish tradition that takes the destruction of the Temple to be an unparalleled catastrophe, which will be undone. Gellman speculate that upon the rebuilding of the Temple the problematic verses will take on a new meaning, and there is indeed rabbinic debate about how many of the commandments will apply in the Messianic era⁸.

Finally, Gellman returns to his Satisfaction Criterion. Does the proposal developed satisfy it? I suppose that, if it was ever worth sacrificing greatly for God, then it still is. But insofar as the reader now has less reason for believing that the commandments are from God, or that he intends us to fulfil them today, the reader might be less willing to sacrifice greatly for the sake of her Judaism. I'm afraid that Gellman has left the reader with less reason for believing that the commandments are from God or that he intends us to fulfill them today. This is quite the opposite of his purpose.

The problem is this: Gellman has laid out the problems, but his answer is very complicated. His proposal has many moving theological and moral parts. How likely is it that God would go about revealing himself in this way? *If there is evidence against the historicity of the Torah, where historicity seems very much the point, then a much simpler, and thus more plausible, hypothesis is that the Torah is false, and hence not divine revelation at all. In order to show that his proposal is plausible, Gellman needs to provide some positive evidence for it. Otherwise, the maneuvers strike as ad hoc.*

⁸ See e.g. Midrash Tehillim 146:7.

Maybe the evidence could be in the miraculous survival of the Jewish people Gellman mentions in the footnote. In any case, Gellman might need the kind of apologetics he eschews in Chapter 4.

After this criticism, I must repeat that this is an excellent book—original and insightful—and that it should appeal to a wide audience—Jewish and Christian. If it does not ultimately work, then it shares that feature with almost every substantive philosophical effort.

A final point about form rather than substance: Reviewers usually miss the efforts publishers invest into their books. This book is magnificently produced. The cover has a soft velvety texture, and displays a beautiful Milky Way and skyline. The pages are thick, and the fonts are clean. The words were too close to each other on a couple of lines. Gellman went with a reputable academic publisher, that focuses on works in Jewish studies, but is not well known in academic philosophy. Given the quality of the production, I hope that they might consider adding philosophy books to their list more generally.