

Session One: Revelation as Law: Baruch Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn and the Birth of the Jewish Religion

Part One: What is revelation?

1. Revelation is simultaneously theological, philosophical, and political
 - a. theological: who or what is this God who reveals?
 - b. philosophical: what does the answer to this theological question tell us about human knowledge of the world?
 - c. political: do the Jewish people play a special role in how humanity knows the God of Israel and this God's truth?
2. Revelation as exposure: l'galot/hitgalut/galut
3. Pre-modern Jewish conceptions of revelation:
 - a. theological: God as self-revealing ("And he built there an altar, and called the place El-beth-el, because there God was revealed unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother." Genesis 35:7)
 - b. philosophical: intimate tie between knowledge of the world and God's self-revealing ("The secret things belong unto the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:28)
 - c. political: Israel's exile ("until the LORD removed Israel out of His sight, as He spoke by the hand of all His servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria, unto this day." 2 Kings 17:23)
 - d. "This is the purpose of exile; that Israel make visible God's kingdom, which is indeed everywhere. The true meaning of the word galut (exile) is hitgalut (revelation), that the glory of God's kingdom be revealed in every place. This task is completed by the souls of Israel in this world..." (The Gerer Rebbe, as translated in Arthur Green, "The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet")

Session One, Part Two

Revelation as Law: Baruch Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn and the Birth of the Jewish Religion

1. Is Spinoza the last of the medievals or the first of the moderns?

- a. He's the last of the medievals:
 - i. excommunication
 - ii. authority of Jewish community
 - iii. pressure of external communities
- b. He's the first of the moderns:
 - i. he lives apart from the Jewish community without converting to Christianity
 - ii. anticipates (if not intentionally) a number of modern interpretations of Judaism: secularism, Zionism, humanism
 - iii. the breakdown of traditional authority: who has the authority to un-excommunicate Spinoza?

2. Spinoza sets a number of important challenges for subsequent Jewish thinking about revelation.

- a. **theological:** who or what is this God who reveals?

Spinoza's rejection of a transcendent God: "We conclude, therefore, that God is described as a lawgiver or prince...merely in concession to popular knowledge; that in reality God acts and directs all things simply by the necessity of His nature and perfection, and that His decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity."

3. Moses Mendelssohn and the Birth of the Jewish Religion

- a. The historical and political context of Jerusalem
- b. The argument of Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism
 - i. “The state, therefore, has rights and prerogatives with regard to the property and actions of men. It can give and take, prescribe and prohibit according to law; and since it is also concerned with actions as such, it may punish and reward.”
 - ii. “there can be no contract between the church and the citizens, for all contracts presuppose cases of collision which are to be decided. Where no imperfect rights exist, no collisions of claims arise; and where no decision is required between one set of claims and another, a contract would be an absurdity.”
- c. Implications of Mendelssohn’s argument for defining “Judaism”
 - i. Judaism is not about dogmatic faith. Judaism concerns obedience to the law.
 - ii. Jewish law is not political. It is a matter of the heart.
- d. Tensions in Mendelssohn’s Argument
 - i. On the one hand, a traditional view of the law: “He who is not born into the law need not bind himself to the law; but he who is born into the law must live according to the law; and die according to the law.”
 - ii. On the other hand, Mendelssohn provided no philosophical or theological justification for why Jews should obey the law. By virtue of his own definitions, he *could not* provide any philosophical or theological justification for Jews to follow the law because he had argued that Jewish law is a temporal, historical truth, whose legitimacy neither rests upon the universally accessible dimensions of philosophical truth nor upon the dogmas of particular theological belief.

- b. **philosophical:** what does the answer to this theological question tell us about human knowledge of the world?

Spinoza's rejection of the oral law and rabbinic authority: "The universal rule, then, in interpreting Scripture is to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in light of its history." This requires an understanding of "The nature and properties of the language in which the books of the Bible were written.... An analysis of each book and arrangement of its contents under heads.... we should depart as little as possible from the literal sense... such a history should relate... the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author of each book, who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write for, and in what language."

- c. **political:** do the Jewish people play a special role in how humanity knows the God of Israel and this God's truth?

Spinoza's rejection of the chosenness and separateness of the Jewish people: "ceremonial observances... formed no part of the Divine law, and had nothing to do with blessedness and virtue, but had reference only to the elections of the Hebrews, that is (as I have shown in Chap. III.), to their temporal bodily happiness and the tranquility of their kingdom, and that therefore they were only valid while that kingdom last."