Revelation of the Torah: What For?

1 Introduction

It is a central claim of Judaism that God has spoken to human beings. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible (henceforth 'the Bible') is filled, from beginning to end, with such episodes of divine communication. Soon after creating Adam, God instructs him about the Tree of Knowledge. Shortly after we encounter Abraham, God instructs him to leave his homeland. And these are pretty typical for the Bible. Many individuals receive prophecies and instructions tailored to their specific situations.

But without question, the divine communication most central to the Bible, and to the Jewish tradition more broadly, was the "giving of the Torah" at Mount Sinai (Exodus, chapters 19-24). The content that was then communicated–let us call it 'the Torah'–was evidently far broader and more fundamental than any of the custom-tailored messages God communicated to individual prophets. The exact details of the Sinaitic revelation–what was then revealed, to whom, and how–are far from crystal clear, even within the Bible and later Jewish tradition.[1] But what's clear, both from the narrative report in the Book of Exodus, and from how it was told and retold, is that the Torah was understood to be directed not just to those whom God immediately addressed, but to a much wider audience. The wider audience included at least all future generations of Israelites, "all your generations to come" as the Bible repeatedly puts it.[2]

According to a rather influential strand in Rabbinic theology, the Torah was directed to this wider audience not *just* in the sense that God intended them to learn of the Sinaitic revelation and of the Torah that was revealed. Rather, it's meant in the stronger sense that *God revealed to those yet unborn*, in a way mediated by the events at Sinai, whatever it is that God revealed to those physically present then and there.[3] The Sinaitic revelation, as a number of Jewish thinkers have put it, reverberates throughout time and space.

If God revealed the Torah to people spread across time and space, it is evidently of more than merely local interest, and is not simply a response to some particular need or circumstance. The Torah, as we might put it, *transcends* spatial, temporal, and circumstantial variation.[4]

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[1] See Sommer [2015, ch. 2].

[2] And some sources suggest that it was directed to humanity as a whole. See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* Yitro Parsha 1, *Sifre Devarim* 343.

[3] See, e.g. *Midrash Tanhuma Pekude* 2, and *Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 41. For a philosophical analysis of this sort of phenomenon, see Mavrodes [1988].

[4] A couple of clarifications: first, this isn't meant to be inconsistent with the widely held view that the *manner* and *language* in which it was initially formulated were in some sense especially fitting for the intellectual and moral capacities of its first recipients. Second, it isn't meant to imply that all of the instructions contained in the Torah are *applicable* and *practicable* in all circumstances. Many of them have non-trivial conditions of application or implementation, such as being in the land of Israel, or having a standing Temple. But such instructions could still be of cardinal impor-

Indeed, a somewhat more controversial but still highly influential strand in Rabbinic theology understands the transcendence of the Torah in an even stronger, *teleological* fashion. It's not just that the Torah's relevance isn't vitiated by geographical or historical variation; it's that in the *explanatory order* of God's creation of and interaction with the world, the Torah is *prior to* any geographical and historical variation, and indeed prior to the creation of the world, period. It's not as though in the logical stages of divine deliberation God first decided to create a world with such-and-such kinds of creatures, and with thus-and-such a history, and *then* saw that the Torah was what these creatures needed in all manner of times and places. Rather, it was that God *first* saw that the Torah was the thing that had to be known and observed, and then saw that this would necessitate certain kinds of creatures in certain sorts of circumstances. The creation of the creatures we have and in roughly the circumstances they're in is a *means* to the *end* of bringing the Torah into view and practice. Thus, in his comments on the very first words of Genesis, the foremost medieval Jewish exegete, Rashi, cites a Midrashic play on the Hebrew word (*reishit*) for 'beginning':

> 'IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED': God created the world *for the sake of* the Torah, which is called (Proverbs 8:22) "The beginning of His (God's) way"[5]

On this view, the Torah transcends spatial, temporal, and circumstantial variation much like a Platonic universal: not only is it made *present* to each addressee, but it would have existed in some form or other whether or not there had *been* any addressees, and it is part of the explanation for why there are the addressees that there are.

To be sure, this view is not the only classically Jewish one. Maimonides, for example, won't allow *anything* to be explanatorily prior to (or the telos of) the creation of the world (*Guide* III:13). But the 'Platonic view' is sufficiently central to the Jewish theological tradition that as a committed Jew I find it worthwhile exploring its cogency and consequences. So I shall indeed assume that the Torah is a transcendent telos of the world.

2 The Puzzle

But that assumption naturally invites the question: why the need, then, for *revelation*?

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tance, even when they can't be implemented, because of what they teach. See Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 71a.

[5]See also Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 88a and *Zohar Terumah* 161a.

You might think this is a rather silly question. Given the cardinal importance of what was revealed, *of course* God would want us to know it. But this misunderstands my question. I'm asking: why did our knowledge of these matters of cardinal importance *come by way of revelation*? Why didn't God have us discover them through the use of our own general-purpose cognitive faculties?

You might think the question-so-clarified is only a tad less silly than the question as initially understood. After all, even the brightest of us are pretty feeble-minded. So, as philosophers like Sa'adia and Aquinas have argued, even if we could eventually discover these things on our own, it would presumably take us a *very* long time. Indeed, it might take so long that we'd bring about our own extinction, through nuclear weapons, or greenhouse gases, or whatnot, before we came to discover them! Given, then, just how important the content of the revelation at Sinai was, it seems to make perfectly good sense that God wouldn't leave us to our own devices to try to figure it out ourselves.[6]

But this fails to reckon with the explanatory priority of the Torah. My question isn't: given that we are the way we are, and that the world is the way it is, why did God reveal all of this? It's the question: given that God presumably had a plethora of creative possibilities, and that the Torah was 'in the driver's seat', why did God arrange things to begin with in such a way that we'd *need* to rely on revelation to come to know the Torah? After all, presumably God *could have* made us far less feeble-minded than we are. It seems that human beings–or some creature or other that would have been able to observe the Torah–could have had general-purpose cognitive faculties powerful enough as to be up to the task of discovering the wisdom of the Torah with their own natural capacities.[7] So why didn't God create beings like that?

Note well certain presuppositions of my question: I am assuming that the Torah, or a good part of it, is a kind of *wisdom*: it contains deep and illuminating truths about God and reality, about who we are and how we ought to be. If the heart of God's Sinaitic revelation consisted instead in, say, eschatological details or non-trace-leaving pre-historic truths, then my question wouldn't really get off the ground. Even much more powerful general-purpose cognitive faculties wouldn't necessarily give us insight into *those* things; the latter might not be the *kind* of things that can be known by the light of reason or other natural means. (If God were to simply have implanted the belief in these things, or even if He had endowed us with some special-purpose faculty for uncovering just these truths, this wouldn't be to bypass the need for revelation, as much as to provide the revelation

[6]Sa'adia's Introductory Treatise to *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*; Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* Prima Pars Q. 1.

[7]And, moreover, that they could have nonetheless–or maybe *for that reason*–recognized how dependent they were on God, and how humble they ought to be. With such a plethora of creative possibilities, it's hard to believe that the cultivation of virtues like humility would have *necessitated* our being reliant on revelation. Thanks to David Shatz for discussion here.

in a different way. It would be to reveal these things by way of simply causing us to believe them. See Mavrodes [1988].) And perhaps in some religions those things are at the heart of their putative revelation.

But Judaism is not like that. Even a cursory glance at the content of what was taken to be revealed at Sinai reveals little by way of eschatology, and nothing about pre-history that isn't clearly theological. The Torah is devoted to describing God, humanity, and their relationship in the here-and-now. And in a number of places the Bible itself conceives of what was so-described as exhibiting great wisdom–indeed, it assumes that *once revealed* we can *see* the wisdom in the Torah.[8]

So, I take it that there isn't any *obvious* obstacle to us uncovering the sort of things the Torah essentially consists in. If there is an obstacle–and I will later contend that there is–it's not going to be *obvious* what it is.

But on the other hand, I am assuming that the Torah *was* revealed. At least since Hobbes and Spinoza many modern theologians and Biblical scholars have contended, on theological, moral, textual, or historical grounds that no part of the Five Books of Moses was strictly speaking *revealed*, that there was no *genuine* divine communication at Sinai. Those theologians and scholars who maintain this, but also strive for some consistency with the Bible, are forced to reinterpret a good deal of what the latter actually says. Thus, they might understand Biblical statements that depict God as speaking the words of Torah as a figurative way of saying that some particularly wise and spiritually gifted Israelites came to discover those truths upon encountering God or reflecting on God's nature. Of course, if that were so, my question wouldn't really get off the ground. It would turn out that God *did* create us so we could discover the Torah on our own.

But by my lights this would make the accounts in the Bible highly misleading. Misleading enough that it would call into question the moral probity of their authors, which would in turn undermine the claim that they were so spiritually gifted as to have deep theological insights.[9] But in any case, my project is to try to understand the view that God indeed communicated some content at Sinai, and that we human beings weren't able to reason our way to what was communicated.[10]

Finally, I am assuming that there aren't *other* creatures–perhaps on some exoplanets, or in some other universes–who *are* endowed with faculties powerful enough to discover the wisdom of the Torah with their own natural capacities, and who can then live the way of life the Torah prescribes. If there are such, then again my question couldn't get off the ground. To someone who asks why God didn't create beings with faculties powerful enough to discover the wisdom of the

[8] See, e.g. Deuteronomy 4:6-8 and Psalms 19:8.

[9] See Heschel [1976, 227].

[10] Thus, the view I'm trying to understand is opposed not just to those who deny divine revelation altogether, but to those, such as Franz Rosenzweig in his most radical moods, who would restrict the divine revelation to God's self-disclosure. See Sommer [2015, 29, 104-105].

Torah on their own, and who could then live the way of life the Torah prescribes, the answer would be, "God did". To those who would ask why God didn't create *human beings* that way, a plausible answer might be that "God couldn't, because they wouldn't be human beings", or "God likes plenitudinous diversity," or some such thing. Either way, there isn't much of a question.

In effect, the puzzle consists in the following combination of commitments: the Torah is a repository of wisdom, so central to the cosmos that its concrete realization is the end for which creation took place. But on the other hand no creature was endowed with a sufficiently powerful general-purpose cognitive faculty to easily discover that wisdom on their own, a fact which necessitated God communicating it. And that's puzzling, since it seems like creation wasn't properly matched to its purpose.

Though none of the individual commitments is universally endorsed by Jewish thinkers, none is particularly quixotic, either. And even their combination strikes me as pretty widely held by traditional Jews. In any case, I wish to examine how we might make sense of it.

In the next two sections I will suggest two ways of making sense of it. Both draw on existing strands in Jewish thought. And both contend that while a way of life in keeping with the Torah exhibits great wisdom, it's not the kind of thing that a wise individual could discover.

But first I briefly want to mention another possible solution, and explain why I don't think it's adequate. One might suggest that the wisdom in the Torah–about God and man and the relationship between them–can be known only *second-personally*; it can be known only by *actually encountering God, as a person* (or reading narratives about such encounters).[11] Since that's so, even if God had endowed us with a much more powerful cognitive faculty, there's simply no way we could have come to discover the Torah without a divine revelation. Someone needed to actually encounter God.

I think there's a great deal of truth in this solution. But I don't think it's adequate as a solution to *our puzzle*. The reason is that it elides an important distinction between two senses of divine revelation: revelation by way of manifestation, and revelation by way of communication. As George Mavrodes [1988] points out, you can reveal a truth by *manifesting* it–say, revealing that you can speak English, by speaking English. And you can do that without communicating that you can speak English. You might have said "I can speak French", and not "I can speak English". Indeed, you can manifest a truth without communicating anything at all. You might inadvertently reveal to me that you have a wart without so much as being aware that I'm there. Communication requires at the very least intentionally bringing another person to understand or believe something, by way of some

[11]For a seminal treatment on the idea of second-personal knowledge of God, see Stump [2010, chapters 3-4]. On its application to the question of why revelation is necessary, see Berkovits [2004, Ch. 2].

meaningful sign; and manifesting a truth doesn't entail doing that at all. Conversely, you can communicate a truth that you do not thereby manifest: when you say "I can speak French," you communicate your competence in French without manifesting it.

Now, according to the Biblical account, God undoubtedly revealed a lot about Himself without saying a word. He revealed His level of providential care for humanity at large, and the Israelites in particular; He revealed His absolute control over nature and its laws; and He revealed much else besides, just by doing what He did. He might well have revealed by way of manifestation, *at Sinai*, truths He didn't otherwise reveal.

But remember, I am assuming that God also *communicated* some content at Sinai. (To be clear, this does not entail that God employed ordinary human language, or other conventional signs, to communicate; just that God did in fact communicate.) The Decalogue, the heart of the Torah if anything is, begins with "God spoke all these words, saying" (Exodus 20:1). And so do countless other verses. Thus, manifestation is not the *only* way He revealed things, and not *everything* that He revealed was revealed by manifestation. God *spoke* much of the Torah, and seems to have revealed it in no other way.

Now, even if we grant, what seems plausible, that many of the truths that God revealed by manifestation could only be known by coming to know God Himself; and even if we grant, what seems plausible, that many of the truths that God revealed by communication could be known only if we had *already* come to know God Himself; that does nothing to explain why, or make remotely plausible the claim that, *the truths that God revealed by communication had to be revealed.* It just explains why God had to reveal Himself if He wanted to reveal anything at all. What remains mysterious is that no creature was endowed with a sufficiently powerful general-purpose faculty to discover the wisdom that God *communicated* to humanity.

3 The Necessity of Contingency

Suppose, as many natural theologians think, that a suitably powerful creaturely intellect could discover the existence of God, and so discover that the greatest good for humanity is to stand rightly with respect to God, and finally discover that standing rightly with respect to God consists primarily in loving devotion to God above all else.[12] (To be clear, being devoted to God above all else doesn't en-

[12] This last claim agrees with the Biblical take as well. The verses of the *Shema*, the most central theological affirmation in the Jewish tradition, move immediately from the solemn declaration of God's oneness to the cardinal command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). As the 2nd century sage, Rabbi Eliezer, elaborates, in order to relate properly to God, whatever it is you otherwise value most–

tail being devoted to God to the *exclusion* of all else. Caring for one's neighbor might be absolutely necessary to stand rightly with God.) *We* might even have such suitably powerful intellects.

Now, it might seem like this supposition has made my task much harder, if not impossible. If a creature endowed with a suitably powerful intellect could discover all *that*, then what of great significance is left that could possibly need to be communicated by God? In what important truths about God or man could the Torah consist, which are not the *kinds* of truths that could be accessed by a general-purpose faculty, given that even *we* could supposedly figure out ourselves what our greatest good is?

Here's a simple-minded proposal: the important truths in which the Torah consists are about the things that God wants from us that *aren't entailed by our attaining our greatest good.*

But if they aren't entailed by our attaining our greatest good, then why *would* God want those things from us? It doesn't seem like it could be for our good, since we could attain our greatest good without them; and it doesn't seem like it could be for God's good, since that is theologically unbecoming. More importantly, even if we set aside such theological sensibilities, we can ask: where is the *wisdom* in living a life in accordance with those things? Sure, if an all powerful being tells you to do something, it's pretty sensible to keep your head down and comply. But that's not a display of real wisdom; it's just common sense. Wisdom is about living life well and fully, not about exercising your survival instinct.

My answer, which draws from the medieval Jewish philosopher, Hasdai Crescas (1340–1411), is this[13]: Loving devotion to God above all else requires that there be *something* God asks of you, the doing of which *isn't* already necessitated by standing rightly with respect to God, and which you go ahead and do. The reason, in brief, is this. Loving devotion to God–just like loving devotion to anyone–requires a willingness to act for God. But since there's no way we can give something to God that isn't already His, or otherwise make God any *better*, the only way we can act for God is by doing what God wants us to do *because God wants us to do it.* That is, loving devotion to God requires that there be something God wants you to do that you are willing to do because God wants you to do it.

What's more, though: loving devotion to God *above all else* requires placing God above everything in one's life, *including oneself and one's own greatest good.* And this plausibly requires that there be something God wants you to do that you are willing to do *just* because God wants you to do it–and not, say, because it's entailed by your own greatest good. As Crescas says, "for the one who serves

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whether that's your life, or your possessions, or whatnot–you must love and devote yourself to God even more (Babylonian Talmud *B'rakhot* 61b).

[13]See Segal [forthcoming-a, §4] for a more extensive discussion and several variations of the answer I develop here.

God and loves Him truly…does not consider his advantage but only service; *and therefore all his good counts for nothing*" [2018, 225].

But then if God asked nothing of us other than what is entailed by standing rightly with respect to Him, then no one who was well-informed and prudent could love God above all else–and so no such person could achieve their greatest good. For if they were well-informed, they'd see what is necessary for achieving their greatest good; and if they were prudent they'd endeavor to do what is so necessary, because it's necessary. So they'd have no opportunity to do what God wants of them *just* because God wants them to do it. On the other hand, presumably no creature who isn't well-informed and prudent could achieve her greatest good. So if God asked nothing of us other than what is entailed by standing rightly with respect to Him then none of us could achieve our greatest good.

That puts God in a bind. Unless, that is, God asks of us to realize some state of affairs that *isn't* entailed by our standing rightly with respect to Him: something like, *Thou shall honor the Sabbath*, or *Thou shalt not wear wool and linen.* God would thereby create an opportunity for us to do something *just* for God.

That's the stuff of the Torah, on this view. To answer the question why God would ask us to do these things: it's for us. *Because in order to achieve our greatest good (our relationship with God) we have to aim at something other than our greatest good (at God and God's will).* There's great wisdom in that. And it's a wisdom that even *we* could discover on our own.

But the wisdom is at the level of the form, not the substance; the quantifier, not the particular instance. Which is why revelation was necessary. The truths about what God wants from us, beyond what is entailed by our standing rightly with respect to Him, needed to be 'filled in by [the divine] Hand'.[14] Just like non-trace-leaving pre-historic truths, they're not the kind of things that can be known by reason or other general-purpose faculties. But unlike such truths, living by them can be a mark of wisdom.

4 Systematicity

You might think that not all of the commandments and instructions in the Torah needed to be filled in by Hand. Some of them, like the prohibitions on murder and theft, can perhaps be known independently of revelation–even while others, like the command to honor the Sabbath or the prohibition to wear wool and linen, can't. That might be the distinction the Talmud (*Yoma* 67b) draws between so-called *hukim* ("matters that Satan challenges because the reason for them

[14]This effectively inverts the view of Franz Rosenzweig that the only content that *was* divinely revealed was the command to love God above all else, while the details of how we would do so were a human response. See Rosenzweig [1971, 178]. That view does nothing to resolve our puzzle.

are not known") and *mishpatim* ("matters that even had they not been written, it would have been logical that they be written").[15] It's definitely the distinction that medieval Jewish philosophers drew between *mitzvot shim'iyot* (commandments known only through tradition) and *mitzvot sikhliyot* (commandments knowable through reason).

In any case, it gives rise to a simple solution that I've neglected until now: why not just divide up the two jobs we've identified for the Torah–of being a repository of wisdom, and being the kind of thing that no general-purpose cognitive faculty could discover–between the two kinds of commandments? Why can't we solve the puzzle simply by letting the commandments knowable through reason do the job of exemplifying the wisdom of the Torah, and the commandments known only through tradition do the job of requiring a revelation, without there being any wisdom at all (whether in substance *or* form) in the latter?

Well, for one thing, that solution doesn't fit well with the central Biblical text that speaks to the wisdom of the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:6-8), since the latter mentions the whole gamut of commandments. For another thing, it's not clear why the Israelites' adoption of nearly universally held and rationally derivable moral norms would be evidence of great wisdom.

But most importantly, I think the proposed divide is too neat. The questions of whether there *is* a norm forbidding murder, and if so, what its contours are (whom can't you murder? is it ever justified? what counts as murder anyway?), are tied up in intricate ways with other more vexed moral questions, which are in turn wrapped up with even more difficult metaphysical and theological and epistemological questions, the Torah's answers to which lie on the other side of the proposed divide. The case of the norm prohibiting murder is just one instance of a wider phenomenon: the *intrinsic systematicity of philosophy*. One philosophical question leads to another, which leads to another, and so on–so much so that any two philosophical questions are connected, whether directly or indirectly. And so no substantive philosophical claim–no matter how innocuous it might initially seem–can be sequestered off from highly contentious philosophical debates.

It's impossible to do justice in the space I have here to the claims in the previous paragraph. They need to be made far more precise and given a proper defense. I have tried to do so elsewhere.[16] But we need to at least spell out a few of the consequences of intrinsic systematicity, since they're at the heart of my own, second solution.

The intrinsic systematicity of philosophy has consequences for the *the space of grand philosophical theories*. Philosophical issues are interconnected to the extent

[15] Although, probably not. As David Shatz pointed out to me, the Talmud's characterization of *mishpatim* is *consistent* with our not being smart enough to discover them on our own. Also, the Talmud's distinction is not exhaustive.

[16] Segal [2020, forthcoming-b].

that the viable grand philosophical theories–internally coherent comprehensive packages of views that settle every philosophical question–are few and far between. Not just any miscellaneous collection of viable individual philosophical theses is going to be a viable collection; very far from it. If you start with a viable grand philosophical system, and start tinkering around with one piece of it, you'll need to play around with a whole host of others in order to make the new system viable. Indeed, given just how far apart the viable grand philosophical theories are, we can't sensibly do a wholesale *comparison* regarding their intuitive plausibility or theoretical virtues. Any single intellectual character, cast of mind, perspective, or sum total of life experiences will distort the plausibility and overall assessment of some number of viable grand theories.

But on the other hand, the intrinsic systematicity of philosophy has the consequence that you can't proceed piecemal either. Philosophical issues are interconnected to the extent that philosophical inquiry is *evidentially unstable*. One issue invariably leads to another, and to another, and so on, in ways that have nontrivial evidential bearing. However far you've gotten in inquiring into a particular philosophical question, it's very likely that if you were to continue to chase down the implications of the position that is currently best supported by your evidence, you will *at some point* hit upon a connection that induces a shift in plausibility. So philosophy cannot properly be pursued piecemeal; any attempted isolation or sequestration of issues would be objectionably arbitrary.

So you can't properly proceed piecemeal; and you can't properly proceed by comparing overall systems. There seems to be no way to proceed, period. And this would appear to have rather serious skeptical implications. None of us could know or even reasonably believe any answer to any substantive philosophical question. Wisdom would forever elude us.

I say this *appears* to have skeptical implications, because I think it *does*, if each of us is working on his own, or even collaboratively, but without any special revelation. And it would, even for creatures with much more powerful general-purpose cognitive faculties, so long as they were finite and saw the world from a particular perspective. One special thing about this sort of skepticism is that it can't be remedied simply by super-charging our standard cognitive faculties. It has nothing really to do with specifically human weakness or limitations; it has everything to do with the way reality itself is.

You can probably see where this is going now. The second proposed solution to our puzzle begins with the claim that the Torah, across all of its facets and commandments, constitutes a comprehensive philosophical system. If not *fully* comprehensive, then still rather wide-ranging; and though rarely explicitly philosophical, still often implicitly so; and though *presented* very *un*-systematically, all the ingredients are there from which a system can be constructed. It speaks to the biggest metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical questions about God, humanity, and the world. Like every viable comprehensive system, its parts hang together

rather tightly. If you start tinkering around with a part or two, you'll need to adjust many other parts to arrive at another viable comprehensive system. But arrive you will. And the other viable systems will be radically different from the Torah's: Spinozistic necessitarian monism, Buddhist emptiness, Neo-Platonist axiarchic plenitude, Lewisian Modal Realism cum Humeanism, and still others–each with their own very different take on the world and how to live well. Some will even be theistic, but still quite "far away" from the Torah. Each one purports to be the deepest wisdom. But only one manages to be correct. And despite its being full of wisdom, the systematicity of philosophy prevents any of us from coming to know it on her own.

Divine revelation could bring this story to a close, without the need for much elaboration. We might suggest that God simply pointed to one of the viable systems, and said, "This is the true one". Or, if we're thinking of matters inquiry-theoretically, God said, "You can stop inquiring here." (What was revealed, then, was not where to *start* our inquiry, but where to *stop*.) And those who relied on God's say-so came to have testimonial knowledge of the truth of the Torah. The end.

I imagine this *deus ex machina* device has an unsatisfying ring to it. And there might well be substantive epistemological problems to confront if divine revelation is taken to provide testimonial knowledge of what we lack independent grounds to believe.[17] In any case, the truth might be more interesting, and subtle. The idea that the Torah contains a system is relatively commonplace among Jewish philosophers–at least medieval ones. But probably none expresses it more forcefully than Nahmanides (1194-1270).[18] And in a striking passage, Nahmanides offers an explanation of an interesting feature of the revelation at Sinai: that it's *collective*. As we noted at the outset, the Torah wasn't revealed just to a single individual; nor was it revealed to each and every Israelite one-by-one. God revealed the Torah to all of the Israelites at once, when they were all gathered together at Sinai. And what God did at Sinai amounted to a revelation of the Torah to the Israelites across all generations. It seems that the addressee of the revelation at Sinai was, at least in the first instance, the Israelites *as a people*. Why might this be? Nahmanides has this to say:

> One's character varies with one's countenance…and our Rabbis had a tradition that the number of different countenances [and hence, underlying characters] is sixty myriads, and this number encompasses all the characters. And therefore the Torah was given with this number [of Israelites present], and they [the Rabbis] said, "It would not

[17] See Hudson [2014].

[18] Nahmanides [1963] maintains that the Torah, properly interpreted, is *complete*, in the sense of being an *absolutely* comprehensive and highly integrated system.

> be fitting for the Torah to be received by anything less than all of the characters." [1963, 162]

Nachmanides doesn't explain *why* that wouldn't be fitting. But we may be well positioned to do so. God's revelation at Sinai didn't function as testimony. Rather, God pointed to a system, the wisdom of which can be fully appreciated, and which can be known, only by an epistemic agent that somehow embodies highly divergent characters, casts of mind, perspectives, and experiences–so divergent that no single person could contain such multitudes. The narrowness of character, cast of mind, perspective, and life experience that beset any single person prevents him from grasping the wisdom of the totality; and it precludes a proper assessment of any system as a whole–his vision is too fragmentary, partial, and, when taken in isolation, skewed. A collective, on the other hand, which contains *a multitude* of characters and casts of mind, and which "lives the Torah" through many different historical scenarios–ranging from great prosperity and peace in its homeland, to the deprivations and degradations of a diasporic existence, and much else in between–can appreciate the Torah's wisdom, and even come to have (non-testimonial) knowledge of the Torah's system. But it's not a system that any of us could have individually come to know; nor is it one that any group of fully rationally individuals would have converged on–except by accident. Indeed, it might well be that none of us knows it *even now*, except in the derivative sense of belonging to a collective that knows it. But it is a system whose realization in concrete reality was of such importance that God was guided by it in shaping the course of Jewish, human, and even cosmic history, so as to ensure that we could collectively latch on to it.[19]

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