

# Degrees of Divine Revelation

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper evaluates two theories of divine revelation due to the Jewish analytic theologians Samuel Lebens and Jerome Gellman. Specifically, it investigates how well those two theories explain a claim about divine revelation implied in some Jewish sources: the claim that divine revelation comes in degrees. After showing how some sources imply that divinely revealed texts vary in the degree to which they are divinely revealed, the paper argues that Gellman's moderate-providence-based theory of revelation explains this claim better than Lebens's divine-appropriation-based theory does.

Analytic Jewish theologians have recently taken up the topic of divine revelation. In this paper, I examine two theories of divine revelation recently advanced by two analytic Jewish theologians—Gellman (2016) and Lebens (2020, chapter 7).<sup>1</sup> I investigate whether they can explain a claim about divine revelation implied by some Jewish sources: the claim that different texts are divinely revealed to different degrees.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Gellman's theory can explain this gradation of degrees of divine revelation while Lebens's cannot. I do not claim that Gellman's theory is a better theory overall, only that it has this one advantage over Lebens's theory.<sup>3</sup>

Lebens (2020, 177) writes that “a theory of the revelation that doesn't privilege the Pentateuch over other books cannot be in harmony with the weight of the Jewish tradition.” While Lebens focuses on the claim that the Pentateuch is more important than other texts, some sources in the Jewish tradition imply the existence of many more than two degrees to which various texts are divinely revealed, as I will show. The Pentateuch is revealed to the highest degree, but there are many lower degrees. If these sources are correct, then what a Jewish theory of revelation should explain is not simply why the Pentateuch is more important than other texts, but also how it can be that there are many more than two degrees to which various texts are divinely revealed.

Lebens (2020, 188–189) himself suggests that his account of revelation could be combined with Gellman's. I am sympathetic to this. I think that both theories could be correct simultaneously. That divine revelation comes in degrees is no reason to reject Lebens's theory. Although Lebens's theory cannot explain the gradation of degrees of divine revelation, it can accommodate that gradation—nothing in it rules such a gradation out. I argue, however, that Lebens's theory needs to be combined with Gellman's, because a

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<sup>1</sup> Shorter statements of their views on revelation can be found in Gellman (2023, chapter 6) and Lebens (2022, chapter 14).

<sup>2</sup> I confine myself to divine revelation of texts, although one might view other things, such as God's presence or miracles, as divinely revealed. I take revealedness to be a property of texts. A text is revealed insofar as God uses it to communicate with human beings.

<sup>3</sup> One advantage that Lebens's theory has over Gellman's is that while Gellman (2016, 164) admits that his theory is unprecedented in Jewish tradition, Lebens (2020, 172–173 and 185, in particular footnote 18) cites precedent for his theory.

complete Jewish theory of revelation should explain the gradation of degrees of divine revelation.

Section 1 reviews Jewish sources that imply that different texts are divinely revealed to different degrees. Section 2 explains Gellman's theory. Section 3 explains Lebens's theory and criticizes his views on biblical criticism. Section 4 presents my argument that Gellman's theory can explain the gradation of degrees of divine revelation while Lebens's can only accommodate it.

## 1. Degrees of Divine Revelation in Jewish Sources

In this section, I show that some Jewish sources imply that different texts are divinely revealed to different degrees. I show, that is, that they imply that not all texts that are products of divine revelation are equal. Some are more fully divinely revealed than others. For this reason, assuming that these sources are correct, a Jewish theory of divine revelation should explain how it can be the case that some texts are more fully divinely revealed than others.

I begin by introducing the holy spirit and prophecy. Some Jewish sources distinguish between prophecy and the holy spirit. Prophecy is a higher degree of divine revelation than the holy spirit. Moreover, prophecy and the holy spirit themselves both come in degrees.<sup>4</sup>

Maimonides (1963, 395–403) takes this view. He distinguishes, besides the prophecy of Moses, eleven degrees of prophecy, the lowest two of which are actually not full-fledged prophecy but rather the holy spirit. He writes:

It behooves me to mention to you the degrees of prophecy. . . . Now not everybody who is found in one of the degrees, which I call degrees of prophecy, is a prophet. For the first and second degree are steppingstones toward prophecy, and someone who has attained one of them is not considered as a prophet belonging to the class of prophets discussed in the preceding chapters. And even though he may sometimes be called a prophet, this term is applied to him in a general sort of way, because he is very close to the prophets. (395)

Maimonides goes on to explain that the two sub-prophetic degrees of prophecy are the holy spirit. The lower of the two is the degree attained by someone who does actions inspired by the holy spirit without producing words inspired by the holy spirit. The higher of the two is the degree attained by someone who produces words inspired by the holy spirit. Maimonides writes that this higher degree of the holy spirit is what produced the books of the Hagiographa, the third division of the Hebrew Bible. The books of the prophets, therefore, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, are more fully divinely revealed than the books of the Hagiographa, such as Psalms and Proverbs.

In the seventh chapter of his introduction to his commentary on Mishnah Avot, Maimonides (1975, 80–83) writes that what keep some prophets at lower levels of prophecy

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<sup>4</sup> The holy spirit in this sense should not be confused with the Holy Spirit as conceived of in Christianity. In Christianity, the Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Trinity. The sources that I discuss use the term “holy spirit” to refer to a degree of divine revelation, not a divine person.

than others are their minor moral flaws. For example, Elijah had an excessively angry personality, which limited how high a level of prophecy he could attain.

Various other Jewish sources also discuss the distinction between prophecy and the holy spirit and divide them into degrees.<sup>5</sup> I will confine myself to one especially clear and comprehensive example. Like Maimonides, Luzzatto (1998), an eighteenth-century Jewish theologian and kabbalist, distinguishes prophecy from the holy spirit and divides them both into degrees.<sup>6</sup> He makes a number of different claims as to ways in which divine revelation comes in degrees: not only the distinction between prophecy and the holy spirit, but also the internal differentiation of prophecy into degrees, the internal differentiation of the holy spirit into degrees, and the existence of a degree of divine revelation lower than the holy spirit. This makes his work useful for surveying the various claims that divine revelation comes in degrees that are present in the Jewish tradition, so I will discuss and quote him at some length.

First, Luzzatto explains what the holy spirit is:

God ordained that man should naturally be able to teach himself, understand and reason with his intellect, and thus gain knowledge from his observation of things and their properties. On the basis of this, man is also able to infer and deduce things that are not immediately apparent, and can thus gain a more complete understanding of things. This is the natural process of human reason.

God also decreed, however, that there exist another means of gaining knowledge that is much higher than this. This is what we call bestowed enlightenment.

Bestowed enlightenment consists of an Influence granted by God through various particular means especially prepared for this purpose. When this Influence reaches an individual's mind, certain information becomes fixed in it. He perceives this knowledge clearly, without any doubt or error, and knows it completely, with all its propositions and corollaries, as well as its place in the general scheme. This is [the holy spirit] (*Ruach ha-Kodesh*).<sup>7</sup>

In this manner one can gain knowledge of things otherwise accessible to human reason, but in a much clearer way, as discussed above. On the other hand, one can also gain information that could not be otherwise gained

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<sup>5</sup> For another example, see the medieval kabbalist Bahya ben Asher's commentary on the Bible at Deuteronomy 33:8 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Rabbeinu\\_Bahya%2C\\_Devarim.33.8.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rabbeinu_Bahya%2C_Devarim.33.8.1?lang=bi)). Bahya distinguishes four degrees of prophecy, which are, in order from lowest to highest: "the daughter of a voice [*bat kol*], urim and thumim, the holy spirit, and prophecy." Presumably "prophecy," according to Bahya, can be used in a wider or narrower sense to refer either to the entire spectrum of these four degrees or to the highest degree alone. Bahya also mentions Nahmanides, who he says held that the holy spirit is a higher degree than prophecy. Bahya's discussion is based on Kabbalah, so the reader unfamiliar with Kabbalah will likely not fully understand it. I myself know little about Kabbalah and do not fully understand Bahya's discussion, but I have cited it for readers who have the background to understand it.

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Maimonides's theory of prophecy is very different from Luzzatto's, primarily in that Maimonides holds that prophecy is a natural phenomenon while Luzzatto holds that it is supernatural. Nonetheless, it is a significant similarity that both of them distinguish between prophecy and the holy spirit and hold that the former is a higher degree of divine revelation than the latter and that both themselves come in degrees.

<sup>7</sup> Kaplan, the translator of Luzzatto (1998), translates *Ruach ha-Kodesh* as "Divine Inspiration," but "the holy spirit" is a more literal translation. I have replaced every occurrence of "Divine Inspiration" in my quotations of Kaplan's translation with "the holy spirit."

through natural means. This includes such things as information concerning future events and hidden secrets. (213)

According to Luzzatto, then, the holy spirit is a supernatural way of obtaining knowledge, a way that involves an “influence” divinely granted to a person.

Next, Luzzatto explains that the holy spirit comes in degrees:

This experience, however, can take place on many different levels. These may [vary with respect to]<sup>8</sup> the power of its Influence, the time when it is granted, the manner in which it reaches the individual, and the nature of the things revealed and communicated in this fashion. In every case, however, the Influence comes in such a manner that its recipient is clearly aware of it. (215)

For Luzzatto, then, there are various degrees or gradations of the holy spirit. These degrees are made greater or lesser than each other by a number of factors. This claim is a first claim that divine revelation comes in degrees.

Luzzatto next states that there is a degree of divine revelation lower than the holy spirit, which is also loosely called the holy spirit:

It is also possible, however, that such Influence be extended to a person’s mind so that he can clearly perceive a given concept without his being aware of this Influence. In such a case, it is experienced like any other idea that arises spontaneously in one’s mind. In a broader sense, this is also called [the holy spirit] or “hidden Influence” in the words of our Sages [even though it is actually a much lower level].<sup>9</sup> True [holy spirit], however, is a clear and vivid experience to the one worthy of it, and he is highly aware of its Influence. (215)

This assertion that there exists a degree of divine revelation lesser than the holy spirit is a second instance of a claim that divine revelation comes in degrees.

Luzzatto next explains the difference between the holy spirit and prophecy:

There is another level, however, that is much higher than such [holy spirit]. This is the level of true prophecy.

This is a degree of inspiration where an individual reaches a level where he literally binds himself to God in such a way that he can actually feel this attachment. He then clearly realizes that the One to whom he is bound is God, in a manner that will be discussed shortly. This is sensed with complete clarity, with an awareness that leaves no room for any doubt whatsoever. The individual is as sure of it as he would be if it were a physical object observed with his physical senses.

The main concept of true prophecy is therefore that a living person achieves such an attachment and bond with God. This in itself is certainly a very high degree of perfection. Besides this, however, it is also often

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan writes “involve” here, but I think “vary with respect to” is a clearer translation.

<sup>9</sup> This bracketed material is due to Kaplan.

accompanied by certain information and enlightenment. Through prophecy one can gain knowledge of many lofty truths among God's hidden mysteries. These things are perceived very clearly, just like all knowledge gained through bestowed enlightenment, as discussed above. Prophecy, however, comes with much greater force than [the holy spirit], as we shall explain shortly. (215)

Prophecy, then, is a greater degree of divine revelation than the holy spirit. It differs from the latter in that it involves a special kind of attachment to God and in that it involves greater "force." This is a third example of a claim that divine revelation comes in degrees.

A bit later in his text, Luzzatto explains that like the holy spirit, prophecy also comes in degrees:

Even after it is fully attained, prophecy still has different levels and degrees, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, some prophets may prophesy many times, while others may only do so once or twice [in their entire career].<sup>10</sup> Qualitatively, there are some who attain a very close attachment to God and thus receive very great enlightenment, while the attachment of other prophets may not be as great, and their enlightenment is correspondingly inferior.

In one respect, however, all prophets are the same. They all are completely aware of their attachment to God. The revelation that they experience is unambiguously recognized as coming from God, without any doubt at all. It is only in the degree of attachment, revelation and enlightenment that differences exist. (225)

Thus, different cases of prophecy are instances of divine revelation to different degrees. Like the holy spirit, prophecy has degrees that are made greater or lesser than each other by a number of factors. In this case, those factors fall into two categories: the qualitative and the quantitative. This is a fourth example of a claim that divine revelation comes in degrees.

Luzzatto does not explicitly apply his account of prophecy and the holy spirit to texts, but doing so is a natural extension of his view. The Babylonian Talmud, at Megillah 7a, states in the name of various rabbis that the biblical book of Esther, which is part of the Hagiographa, was written with the holy spirit. Maimonides cites this text to support his claim that the Hagiographa in general were written with the holy spirit rather than prophecy. The natural way to read this text in light of Luzzatto's account, too, is that the book of Esther was written with a degree of divine revelation lower than prophecy,<sup>11</sup> and is therefore less fully divinely revealed than prophetic books (e.g., Isaiah).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This bracketed material is due to Kaplan.

<sup>11</sup> I am aware that the rabbis of the Talmudic period may not have shared Luzzatto's or Maimonides's taxonomy of degrees of divine revelation. I am reading the Talmud through the lens of Luzzatto and Maimonides, both later thinkers, in a way that the sages quoted in the Talmud may not have intended. In light of the claims of Tzadok Hakohen and Kook about interpreting texts in ways their authors did not intend that we will see below, this is arguably a legitimate way to read the Talmud.

<sup>12</sup> I leave to one side the question of whether the books called the "former prophets" (Joshua through II Kings) were written with prophecy or the holy spirit. I am not aware of any authorities who say that they were not written with prophecy, but since they are not the records of the words of specific prophets but rather consist of historical narratives in which prophetic words occur only occasionally, it is not obvious that they were written with prophecy.

Furthermore, if, as Luzzatto and Maimonides claim, prophecy itself comes in degrees, then that opens up the possibility that some books of the literary prophets are more fully divinely revealed than others.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, if, as Luzzatto claims, the holy spirit itself comes in degrees,<sup>14</sup> and if, as Maimonides claims, all the books of the Hagiographa were written with the holy spirit, then that opens up the possibility that some books of the Hagiographa are more fully divinely revealed than others.

One clear case of some biblical books being more fully divinely revealed than others is that the books of the Pentateuch are more fully divinely revealed than all other biblical books, because Moses was greater than any other prophet (let alone anyone who merely wrote with the holy spirit). This is a core tenet of Judaism. Maimonides lists it as the seventh of his thirteen principles of faith.<sup>15</sup> That Moses was the greatest of Israelite prophets is clearly stated in Numbers 12 and Deuteronomy 34:10–12. Luzzatto writes:

There are two totally different levels of prophecy. One is that of every prophet other than Moshe,<sup>16</sup> while the second was the unique level attained only by Moshe. God Himself makes this distinction when He says (*Bemidbar*<sup>17</sup> 12:6, [7]<sup>18</sup>), “If there be a prophet among you, I, God, will make Myself known to him in a vision. . . . Not so My [servant]<sup>19</sup> Moshe.” [The necessity for this vast difference is because it was the Torah itself that was revealed through Moshe’s prophecy.]<sup>20</sup> (1998, 239)

The highest degree of prophecy, and so the highest degree of divine revelation, was that attained by Moses. Thus, the Pentateuch, as the product of the prophecy of Moses, is more fully divinely revealed than any other text.

Some Jewish sources claim that some extra-biblical works are divinely revealed. Shapiro (2023) cites and discusses many such sources. I will quote only two of the sources that Shapiro cites. The first is the 19th-century Hassidic rebbe Tzadok HaKohen, who writes the following about the *Shulhan Arukh*, a 16th-century code of Jewish law:

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<sup>13</sup> See Jeremiah 15:1, which suggests that Moses and Samuel were greater prophets than Jeremiah; Psalms 99:6–8, which seems to assign special prophetic status to Moses, Aaron, and Samuel; and Babylonian Talmud *Hagiga* 13b, which says, “Rava said, everything that Ezekiel saw, Isaiah also saw. To what was Ezekiel similar? To a villager who saw the king. And to what was Isaiah similar? To a city dweller who saw the king” (my translation). A villager who sees the king is much more liable to be impressed with the pomp and circumstance of monarchy than a city dweller who sees the king. The book of Ezekiel is full of fantastic visions. The book of Isaiah has fewer fantastic visions. According to this passage from the Talmud, that is because just as a villager is more liable to be impressed with pomp and circumstance than a town dweller, so too Ezekiel was more impressed with fantastic visions than Isaiah. This suggests that Isaiah was a greater prophet than Ezekiel, in which case presumably the book of Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than the book of Ezekiel. See also *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael*, Tractate Shirah 3, where Rabbi Eliezer says that when the Red Sea was split, even an Israelite maidservant saw things that Isaiah and Ezekiel did not see, implying that all Israelites attained a higher degree of prophecy at that moment than Isaiah and Ezekiel ever did.

<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, Maimonides also claims this, but he distinguishes only two degrees of the holy spirit, only the higher of which involves the production of texts.

<sup>15</sup> See his introduction to his commentary on the tenth chapter of Mishnah Sanhedrin.

<sup>16</sup> I.e., Moses.

<sup>17</sup> I.e., the book of Numbers.

<sup>18</sup> Kaplan incorrectly cites verse 12 here, but the quoted material is from verses 6 and 7.

<sup>19</sup> Kaplan mistranslates by writing “prophet” here, but the text says “servant.”

<sup>20</sup> This bracketed material is due to Kaplan.

And in writing, from the hand of God upon him, he [Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*] was discerning in the composition of the *Shulhan Arukh* and its annotations [written by another author, Moshe Isserles], which has been accepted in all Israel as a book of legal decisions in our generations concerning all the judgements of the Torah and the behaviors of a person according to the Torah. Their words certainly did not come by chance, and the LORD, may He be blessed, sent His spirit upon them, so that all their words might be deliberate, even what they themselves did not intend, for the LORD does not abandon His pious ones, and this concerns a work like this that has been accepted in the whole of Israel. And [the 18th-century kabbalist Jonathan Eybeschutz] has already illuminated this matter in [his book] *Urim VeTumim* in [his] summary of *Tokfo Kohen* [by the 17th-century legal scholar Shabbatai HaKohen], and it is true and just without doubt that all their words are deliberate with the holy spirit, which is the power of the sages, who are preferable to prophets, as is written in [Babylonian Talmud] Bava Batra 12a, and see Nahmanides *ad loc.*<sup>21</sup>

According to Tzadok Hakohen, then, works such as the *Shulhan Arukh* that the entire Jewish people have accepted are divinely revealed.

This even applies to some liturgical poems (piyyutim). Tzadok Hakohen writes:

And because the piyyutim have been accepted in all Israel, one should carefully interpret their words. And even when those who composed them and instituted them did not intend this, it can be true, as it is written the book *Urim VeTumim* that the words of the *Shulhan Arukh* and the like that have been accepted in all Israel are worthy of being interpreted even with meaning that they did not intend, for the spirit of the LORD spoke through them.<sup>22</sup>

The second author cited by Shapiro who writes that extrabiblical texts can be divinely revealed whom I will quote is Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a 19th- and 20th-century religious Zionist thinker. Kook writes:

One should not condemn analysis that is far from the intent of the person who said it [the passage being interpreted], for even if [what is being suggested] is far from his intent, it is not far from the intent of God, who arranged matters so that this teaching would come to us, and He caused us to be attuned to its value.<sup>23</sup> (quoted in Shapiro 2023, 95)

These are only two of the many sources Shapiro cites for this idea. If Luzzatto's claim that the holy spirit is a lesser degree of divine revelation than prophecy is correct, and if extrabiblical writings that have been accepted by the entire Jewish people were written with the holy spirit, then, like the Hagiographa, they are texts that are divinely revealed to a lesser degree than prophetic texts. Perhaps they were written with the degree of divine revelation

<sup>21</sup> *Maḥshevot Harutz* 3:1. The Hebrew text of this quotation of Tzadok HaKohen is available at [https://www.sefaria.org/masvot\\_Charutz.3.1](https://www.sefaria.org/masvot_Charutz.3.1). The translation is my own.

<sup>22</sup> *Peri Tzadik*, Parashat Shekalim, 5. The Hebrew is available at [https://www.sefaria.org/Peri\\_Tzadik%2C\\_Parshat\\_Shekalim.5.1](https://www.sefaria.org/Peri_Tzadik%2C_Parshat_Shekalim.5.1). The translation is my own.

<sup>23</sup> The bracketed material is due to Shapiro.

that, as we saw above, Luzzatto says is lesser than the holy spirit but is loosely called the holy spirit. In light of Luzzatto's claim that recipients of this degree of divine revelation do not know that they are receiving a divine influence, the claim that these authors' texts can have meanings that they did not themselves intend suggest as much.

In summary, combining the various claims found in these sources, there are many degrees of divine revelation: the prophecy of Moses, the prophecy of other prophets (which itself comes in various degrees), the holy spirit (which also itself comes in various degrees), and a still lesser degree that is loosely also called the holy spirit. This implies that there is a gradation of degrees to which various biblical texts are divinely revealed: the Pentateuch is the most fully revealed, the prophetic books are less so, and the Hagiographa even less so. Some extrabiblical writings were also written with the holy spirit, perhaps meaning the degree lesser than the holy spirit that is loosely also called the holy spirit.

Admittedly, some Jewish sources take a different view and say that the Hagiographa are just as fully divinely revealed as the prophetic books. For example, Meiri (1936, 9–11), a medieval Maimonidean, departs from Maimonides in holding that the distinction between the prophetic books and the Hagiographa does not derive from a difference in the degree to which they are divinely revealed.<sup>24</sup> Meiri writes that the distinction between the prophetic books and those of the Hagiographa is that the former concern guidance that the prophets gave to the Israelites of their own times—specifically, guidance in war and exhortations to stop sinning and to live righteously—while the latter consist of books covering other matters, including prophetic revelation about the distant future (e.g., the book of Daniel) and narrative that does not centrally concern prophetic guidance (e.g., the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ruth). The distinction between the last two sections of the Bible is thus not, for Meiri, a matter of how divinely revealed the books in them are.

Though Meiri thus rejects the view that the prophetic books were written with prophecy while the Hagiographa were merely written with the holy spirit, he nonetheless affirms that different prophets had different degrees of prophecy (1936, 10). Neither he nor any other authority, so far as I know, holds that all prophets other than Moses were of equal stature, let alone that divinely revealed extrabiblical texts are divinely revealed to the same degree as any biblical text. Therefore, any Jewish theory of revelation should be able to explain this gradation of degrees of divine revelation. As we have seen, Lebens writes that any Jewish theory of revelation should be able to explain why the Pentateuch is privileged over other writings. That is true, but a Jewish theory of revelation should also be able to explain much more than that. It should be able to explain how it is that divine revelation comes in very many more than two degrees.

## 2. Gellman's View: Moderate Providence

The remainder of this paper will explicate Gellman's and Lebens's views of divine revelation and argue that Gellman's view better explains the gradation of degrees of divine revelation than Lebens's view. This section explicates Gellman's view of divine revelation. (I will show how his view explains the gradation of degrees of divine revelation in section 4. The relevance of his view to this gradation will become apparent only then, not in this section.)

Gellman's theory of revelation makes use of a view that he calls *moderate providence* (Gellman 2016, chapter 5), according to which God's providence consists mainly of

<sup>24</sup> I thank Shlomo Zukier for bringing this view of Meiri to my attention.

providing boundary conditions that guide events in the world in a divinely desired direction. These events take place in accordance with the laws of nature, chance, or human free will. Such providence, called *holistic providence*, works by *top-down causation*, in which, at a micro level, things develop in accordance with, say, chance, or the laws of the behavior of the micro entities, while, at a macro level, there is an organizing principle that guides the overall outcome of the process.

Gellman writes,

Top-down causation refers to when a higher-level system organizes components at a lower level, when the organization cannot be attributed to the properties of the components themselves. The explanation lies in higher organizational levels that work downward to the lower level. This results in chance and randomness at the component level, while the higher-level structure is imposing an overall organization on the chance events, both constraining and directing. Top-down causation denies reductionism, which holds that the behavior of a whole is completely determined by the properties of its elements. (2016, 103)

Gellman explains that some scientists think that top-down causation occurs in some natural phenomena. They think that it sometimes happens that there are regularities at macro levels that are not explained by the laws that apply to the behavior of the micro entities of which the macro entities are made. Instead, there are macro-level organizing principles that explain the regularity at the macro level without themselves being explained by anything at the micro level.

For example, in radioactive decay, each unstable isotope has a half-life, a period of time within which half of a sample of the isotope will decay. However, when any particular atom of the isotope will decay is random. Thus, there is a regularity at the macro level of the entire sample that is not explained by anything at the micro level of an individual atom. Gellman writes,

Take the example of the decay of radioactive material. The half-life of the decay is the time it takes for half of the material to decay into nonradioactive material. There is no way of predicting which atoms will decay in the half-life and which will not. There are no fixed patterns in decays of radioactive material. Yet, the time it will take for half the amount of radioactive material to decay can be exactly predicted. What we have, plausibly, is an exactly determined overall process that on the inside looks for all the world to be made up of random, chance decay of individual atoms. (96)

Gellman gives other examples of alleged top-down causation in science as well.<sup>25</sup> In all the examples, it is claimed that higher-level organizing principles govern the development of some phenomenon even as, at a lower level, the phenomenon develops in accordance with chance or lower-level laws.

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<sup>25</sup> He does say, however, that it is controversial among scientists whether top-down causation occurs. He says (Gellman 2023, 85) that his application of top-down causation to divine providence does not depend on who is correct in that controversy.

Likewise, God can impose organizing principles on the world that govern events at a macro level even as, at a micro level, events are governed by laws of nature, chance, and/or human free will. Following Arthur Peacocke, Gellman suggests that God exercises God's providence over the universe mainly by providing such organizing principles for the universe, principles which guide the universe to divinely desired outcomes, even as, at the lower levels, events occur in accordance with chance, laws of nature, or human free will. (However, Gellman does allow that God's providence may sometimes also involve direct intervention.) This makes providence as an explanation at a macro level consistent with chance, laws of nature, or free will as explanations at a micro level.

This applies to God's providence over human affairs in particular. At a macro level, God's providence explains the course of human affairs, while, at a micro level, free human choices are what explain this. When we observe human affairs, all we see is people making decisions and implementing them, but this does not rule out the possibility that God might have imposed higher-level organizing principles that guide the development on human affairs, thereby exercising providence in a way compatible with human free will.

Gellman applies moderate providence to revelation by saying that God exercises moderate providence over the development of Torah, in order to guide it towards the broad ideas that God wants to reveal. While details of texts are decided upon by human authors in accordance with their free will, God works through this free will with moderate providence to guide the process of the production of Torah to the general ideas God wants to convey. God imposes top-down constraints on the development of Torah. The free choices of human authors occur within those constraints, which are the means by which God guides the process of the production of Torah to certain outcomes.

Gellman writes,

Given this conception, we can give a new twist to a verse in Proverbs: "There are many thoughts in a man's heart, and God's plan is what will stand" (19:21) (my translation). As usually rendered in English, "and" becomes "nevertheless," or "but," saying that God's plan is in *contradiction* to the thoughts of people. As an account of Torah from heaven, as I am conceiving it, the verse describes well the manner in which Torah from heaven proceeds when there is no direct divine intervention. God provides the outermost boundaries and the guiding organizational structures, the rest is filled in by the thoughts of people. No opposition, but cooperation, between the two.<sup>26</sup> (152)

In this way, with moderate providence, God can work through the free will of the human authors of the Torah, making the Torah both a human composition and a divinely revealed text.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gellman's emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> As I noted in footnote 3 above, Gellman admits that his theory of revelation is without precedent in Jewish tradition. That may be so, but moderate providence is a natural fit for how divine providence is conceived in much of the Jewish tradition, starting with the Bible. Bar-Efrat and Brettler's (2014, 545) remark that "[a]s a rule, human beings, not God, occupy the central stage, their lot being determined by their conduct. God acts behind the scenes, usually refraining from direct, supernatural intervention, shaping individual destinies through the natural course of events," which they made concerning the book of I Samuel in particular, might have been correctly said of many other parts of the Bible. Gellman's innovation lies more in applying his conception of non-interventionist moderate providence to divine revelation than in his general conception of moderate

### 3. Lebens's View: Divine Appropriation

I now proceed to explain Lebens's view of divine revelation. Lebens holds that a public, overwhelming, miraculous theophany was witnessed by the Israelites at Sinai. This theophany gave rise to the Jewish tradition. Because God is omniscient, God foreknew that it would give rise to the Jewish tradition and what the contents of that tradition would be. In particular, God foreknew that the tradition would end up attributing both itself as a whole and especially the Pentateuch to God. By going ahead with the theophany with the full foreknowledge of the future contents of the tradition, including the tradition's future attribution of itself to God, God in effect appropriated this tradition. That is to say, God made the tradition God's own, selecting it as a means of communication. This included the Pentateuch, which the tradition came to regard as the most important manifestation of God's revelation. This appropriation is what makes the tradition divinely revealed. In short, God appropriated the future Jewish tradition, thereby making it God's revelation, by initiating a theophany that gave rise to it. This theophany is the sole act whereby God appropriated the entire future tradition.

What is the connection between God's foreknowledge of the future contents of the tradition and God's appropriation of the tradition? The connection is as follows. One of the things that God foreknew about the tradition was that it would attribute itself to God. Thus, by going ahead with the theophany, God was doing something which God knew would result in the tradition being attributed to God. To bring about the attribution of something to oneself is to give consent to that attribution. Thus, by going ahead with the theophany, God consented to the attribution of the tradition to Godself. To consent to the attribution of something to oneself is to appropriate it. For example, if a ghostwriter writes a book in someone's name, by consenting to its publication under her name, that person appropriates the book. In some sense, she makes it her own work, even though she did not write it.

Lebens (2020, 172–173 and 185) cites precedent for this concept of divine appropriation. For example, he quotes the following passage from the Zohar:

Even though the entire Torah is the Word of God, some of it is the words of Moses as well. Which part? For example: the rebuke in the book of Deuteronomy. *Afterwards* they were included in the divine.<sup>28</sup> (172)

He also quotes the following from Exodus Rabbah:

The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He, you're giving Moses permission to write whatever he wants . . . ? [God responded,]<sup>29</sup> "Heaven forbid that Moses should do such a thing, but even if he does, he is trusted. As it says (Numbers 12:7), 'For this is not true of my servant Moses, for his is trusted in all my house.'" (185)

These texts suggest that anything that Moses writes in the Pentateuch is appropriated by God.

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providence (though the latter, too, is not simply a repetition of anything found in Jewish sources, developed as it is in dialogue with modern science and the work of figures such as Arthur Peacocke.).

<sup>28</sup> Lebens's emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> This bracketed material is due to Lebens.

By appropriating the Pentateuch, God can change its meaning. Lebens (2020, 172–173) compares this to the way in which the French artist Marcel Duchamp once took an empty bottle rack and presented it as art without physically changing it at all. By so doing, Duchamp added meaning to the bottle rack. Its emptiness became a commentary on his childlessness. In the same way, God might change the meaning of the Pentateuch by appropriating it, making it mean something that it would not have meant had God not appropriated it. This can justify Rabbinic exegetical techniques that can seem far-fetched.<sup>30</sup>

An example of how God might change the meaning of a part of the Pentateuch by appropriating it may be helpful. The following example is my own, not due to Lebens, but I think it illustrates what Lebens has in mind. In Exodus 33:20, God responds to Moses' request to see God's glory by telling Moses that God's face cannot be seen, for a human being cannot see God and live. The biblical authors assumed that God has body. Interpreted according to its plain sense, the verse presupposes that God has a body and asserts that seeing that body is deadly for human beings.<sup>31</sup> However, Maimonides (1963, 124, 156–157), who thought that God has no body, understood God's glory to be God's essence. The verse, according to him, says that no human being can grasp God's essence while alive.<sup>32</sup> Maimonides's interpretation is not what the human author of the verse meant. However, if God in fact has no body and God appropriated the Pentateuch, then God might have changed the meaning of Exodus 33:20 and turned it into an assertion that God's essence cannot be grasped by a living human being.

Consider the following analogy. Suppose I have no car and instead get around by biking. One day, in a clothing store, I find a T-shirt that says, "I don't put carbon into the atmosphere with my car." The T-shirt is intended to tout that its wearer drives an electric car. I buy the T-shirt and wear it at social gatherings. My friends, who know that I have no car, realize that by wearing it I mean to assert that my bike does not pollute, not to assert that I have an electric car. Although the T-shirt has the definite description "my car" on it, which presupposes that I have a car,<sup>33</sup> by buying and wearing the T-shirt, I have appropriated the sentence that is on it and thereby changed its meaning from an assertion of electric-car ownership to an assertion that my bike does not pollute. Likewise, although Exodus 33:20 contains the definite description "my face," which presupposes that God has a body (since a face is part of a body), by appropriating that verse, God can change its meaning from an assertion that seeing God's body is deadly for human beings to an assertion that no living human being can understand God's essence. In this way, Maimonides's interpretation can be correct despite not being what the human author of the verse intended.

Lebens thinks that his account of revelation can accommodate the constraint on Jewish theories of revelation that I mentioned in the introduction that he thinks such theories need to meet, the constraint of being able to explain why the Pentateuch is privileged over other texts. He summarizes his account and says that it can meet that constraint the following words:

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. also Borges's (1998) fictional review of a work whose text is identical to part of *Don Quixote* but whose meaning is different because it was written by a different author. Lebens does not mention this work of Borges, but it illustrates his point that one can change the meaning of a text by appropriating it.

<sup>31</sup> See Benjamin Sommer (2011), especially the introduction.

<sup>32</sup> See also Maimonides (1975, 82–83).

<sup>33</sup> This is a common view among semanticists, though some, such as Bertrand Russell, have thought that a sentence containing a definite description asserts that something uniquely satisfies the description (Heim and Kratzer 1998, 73–83).

God is all knowing. Presumably, he foresaw the literature, ritual, and law that would come tumbling into being as a result of the Jewish experience at Sinai. And yet, he chose to initiate the experience. Consequently, I claim that Judaism should view the theophany at Sinai as something like a divine stamp of approval of the religious tradition that grew out of it. This can very quickly help us to meet the constraint on a theory of the revelation [that it must privilege the Pentateuch over other texts]. (Lebens 2020, 184–185)

How does Lebens think that this meets the constraint that a Jewish theory of revelation must privilege the Pentateuch over other texts? He explains:

The tradition came to treat the Pentateuch as uniquely divine. But God *knew* that this would happen, in the wake of Sinai, and yet he went ahead with the theophany. He *knew* that these attitudes would become deeply integral to the entire tradition, and yet he gave the tradition his seal of approval. And thus, we can say that either (1) Moses *did* write it all down at God's behest, just as the stenographic model would suggest, or (2) the Pentateuchal text came to be in a somewhat less immediate manner, but God nevertheless foresaw its being attributed directly to him, as a central element of the tradition moving forward, and he *appropriated* it.<sup>34</sup> (185)

Lebens, then, provides two options for explaining how the Pentateuch is more fully divinely revealed than other texts. In light of the sources that I discussed in section 1 above, it would seem to be necessary to expand these two options into two ways of explaining how there can be many more than two degrees to which various texts are divinely revealed. The first option is that the Pentateuch, uniquely among all texts, was dictated word-for-word by God. The second option is that God appropriated the Jewish tradition, which would come to view the Pentateuch as more fully divinely revealed than any other text (and some voices within which would come to imply that other lesser texts have a gradation of degrees to which they are divinely revealed—this is the expansion).

In the remainder of this section, I will argue that the first option is not viable. Then, in section 4 below, I will argue that the second option fares worse as an explanation of degrees of divine revelation than Gellman's view.

The first problem with Lebens's first option is that it is hard to see how this first option can accommodate the gradation of degrees to which texts other than the Pentateuch are divinely revealed. If, say, neither the book of Psalms nor the book of Isaiah was dictated by God, then how can Isaiah be more fully divinely revealed than Psalms? That neither was dictated by God might explain why both are less fully divinely revealed than the Pentateuch, but not why Psalms is less so than Isaiah.

The second problem with Lebens's first option is that modern biblical criticism has concluded that the Pentateuch was composed by multiple human authors long after the time when Moses would have lived, authors whose compositions were then compiled into the Pentateuch by a figure known as the redactor, who lived during or after the Babylonian exile.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lebens's emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> See Rofé (1999) for the evidence for this. For a shorter overview, see Brettler (2014).

Lebens has a response to this. He says that the anomalies that provide evidence for the claims of biblical criticism are only compelling evidence for those claims if one accepts methodological naturalism, the view that the scientific study of a subject matter should eschew supernatural explanations. But to apply methodological naturalism to the study of the Bible is to beg the question against a supernatural origin for the text.

Once one rejects methodological naturalism, Lebens says, traditional explanations for the anomalies that provide evidence for the claims of biblical criticism become a live option for explaining those anomalies, so that the anomalies no longer constitute evidence against traditional views of Pentateuchal authorship.

Lebens (2020, 211) quotes Benjamin Sommer, who writes:

Given the assumptions [traditional Jewish] interpreters made in good faith about the nature of biblical language . . . it was possible to explain away each individual textual oddity that centuries later led to the development of Pentateuchal source criticism. People who make these assumptions honestly find that biblical criticism poses little threat. For those of us who do not fully share those assumptions, however, honesty requires that we confront the challenges of biblical criticism. (Sommer 2015, 262)

It seems, then, that Lebens and Benjamin Sommer both think that, because traditional and critical explanations of the textual anomalies in the Pentateuch are both explanatorily adequate, the choice of which explanations to accept ultimately comes down to what assumptions one makes: Does one assume that that text uses divine language that works totally differently than human language, or not?

But this is a mistake, because explanatory power is not the only theoretical virtue that is relevant to theory choice. If traditional and critical theories of Pentateuchal authorship are on all fours as regards explanatory power, then we should adjudicate between them on the basis of other theoretical virtues, such as simplicity, unity, predictive power, and lack of ad-hocness. In the words of Rofé (1999, 9), we should aim for “the most natural, least contrived, solutions . . . for textual problems and contradictions.”<sup>36</sup> By these standards, modern critical theories are better. Traditional explanations for textual anomalies are often ad-hoc. Critical ones are not. Moreover, while the traditional view of Pentateuchal authorship

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<sup>36</sup> Right after stating his goal in these words, Rofé writes,

I seek, as I said, “the most natural” solutions. But isn’t the Bible supernatural? Does it not contain divine revelation? To this I respond that if we want to understand the Bible and not merely be moved by its majesty, the only tool we have available to us is our own mind—and this instrument is capable of dealing only with the natural, not the supernatural. (1999, 9)

Rofé’s assumption that the human mind is unable to deal with the supernatural is questionable, but Rofé does not need that assumption to respond to the objection that he is responding to here. There is a better response that he could have given, namely, that the objection equivocates over the word “natural.” The word “natural” has one meaning in which it contrasts with “supernatural,” but it has another meaning in which it contrasts with “contrived” (to use Rofé’s own word) or “forced.” In saying that we should seek natural explanations, Rofé presumably means that we should seek explanations that are not contrived or forced. This is distinct from saying that we should seek explanations that are not supernatural. To object to the statement that we should seek the most natural explanations in the sense of “natural” in which “natural” contrasts with “contrived” on the grounds that the Bible is supernatural is to confuse these two senses of “natural.”

can explain the anomalies, it does not predict them. Given a choice between a predictive theory and a merely explanatory one, it is rational to choose the predictive theory.

For example, Rofé (1999, 14) and Brettler (2014, 3) appeal to the statement that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (Genesis 12:6) to show that the Pentateuch was written after the time of Moses, since the statement implies that the Canaanite was no longer in the land at the time of writing, whereas in Moses’ day the Canaanite was still in the land. Rofé notes that the medieval commentator Rashi explains that the Torah is saying that the Canaanite was *already* in the land, not that the Canaanite was *still* in the land. Both explanations—Rashi’s and the explanation that the author lived after the time of Moses—explain how that statement can appear in the Pentateuch, but Rashi’s is ad-hoc. Moreover, the view that the authors of the Pentateuch lived after the time of Moses predicts that statements that reflect that should occur in the Pentateuch. While Rashi’s explanation is explanatory, it is not predictive, whereas the critical view is predictive.

By justifying his rejection of the conclusions of biblical criticism by pointing out that traditional theories of Pentateuchal authorship can explain all relevant textual oddities, Lebens ignores every theoretical virtue other than explanatory power. When theories are on all fours when it comes to one theoretical virtue, rational theory choice is a matter of other theoretical virtues, not of what assumptions one comes to a text with.

Since Lebens’s first option is not viable, the question of whether his view of revelation can explain the gradation of degrees of divine revelation should be answered by seeing whether his second option—that the Torah was not dictated word-for-word by God but God appropriated it and the rest of the Jewish tradition by initiating a theophany that gave rise to them—can explain that. I turn to that task in the next section.

#### 4. Comparison of Gellman’s and Lebens’s Views

How well do Gellman’s and Lebens’s views explain the variation of degrees of divine revelation which the sources that I cited in section 1 imply exists?

Gellman’s view can easily explain it. Gellman notes that the boundary conditions that God imposes in moderate providence can be tighter or looser:

The best way to understand how the Torah came to be is through moderate Divine Providence. . . . In the same way, though presumably with looser top-down constraints, the past and continued existence of the Jewish people and Jewish life are from heaven. And in the same way again presumably with more flexible downward constraints, the oral Torah is from heaven.

The Divine Providence over each of these is constant, at times tighter, with more intervention, at times looser, with holistic providence alone. Providence of the holistic, top-down sort works with and through human freedom with the proviso that the outside boundary conditions are set by Providence, and that there are providential metaphysical organizing principles at work. (2016, 150–151)

In this quotation, Gellman lays out two ways in which divine providence can vary with respect to its tightness or looseness. In the second paragraph, he points out that it can vary with respect to whether it involves direct intervention or only top-down boundary

constraints. In the first paragraph, he says that it can vary with respect to how tight or loose the boundary constraints are, suggesting that they are stricter in the case of the written Torah and looser in the case of the oral Torah and Jewish history.

It is easy to see how holistic, top-down boundary constraints might come in degrees of tightness and looseness. Some boundary constraints might influence the evolution of systems in more detail than others.

This provides an easy way to explain how some texts can be more fully divinely revealed than others. Perhaps God imposed the tightest organizing principles on the process of the authorship of the Pentateuch, and looser organizing principles on the process of the authorship of the prophetic books, and looser ones still on the process of the authorship of the Hagiographa, and looser ones still on the process of the composition of works such as the *Shulhan Arukh*. In this way, Gellman's theory of revelation can explain how it can be that revelation comes in degrees.

In contrast, it is hard to see how Lebens's second option for explaining why the Pentateuch should be privileged over other texts can explain how divine revelation comes in various degrees, as the sources that I surveyed in section 1 imply it does. While this option can clearly *accommodate* such a gradation of degrees—it is not inconsistent with such a gradation—it does not seem able to *explain* this gradation.

To be sure, Lebens's second option can explain why we should treat Jewish texts *as if* they vary in the degrees to which they are divinely revealed in just the way that the sources imply they do. We should treat them in that way because God appropriated the tradition that implies that they so vary.

But can Lebens's second option explain why various texts *actually do* vary in the degrees to which they are divinely revealed in just the way that the sources imply they do? I think not. If the reason that, say, both Isaiah and Psalms are divinely revealed is that God appropriated (the tradition that contains) them both, then if Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms, that can only be because God appropriated Isaiah more than God appropriated Psalms. But how can a single act of divine appropriation appropriate one text more than another?

One might reply that God can appropriate Isaiah more than God appropriates Psalms, and thereby change Isaiah's meaning more than God changes the meaning of the Psalms, by appropriating the tradition some sources within which imply that Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms.<sup>37</sup> This suggestion faces two problems, however. Firstly, as we saw in section 1 above, not all voices in the Jewish tradition accept that the Hagiographa is less fully divinely revealed than the prophetic books. The tradition is not unanimous on this matter. Therefore, it is not clear that God's appropriating the tradition as a whole would be God's endorsing specifically the voices, such as Maimonides and Luzzatto, that imply that Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms, rather than voices such as Meiri that imply otherwise. Secondly, this proposal leads to explanatory circularity. It implies that Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms because God appropriated a tradition that says so. But surely we also want to say that the tradition implies that Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms because Isaiah is more fully divinely revealed than Psalms. The fact about the gradation of degrees of divine revelation must therefore both explain and be explained by the tradition's implying that that fact is the case for the present proposal to work. That is an unacceptable circularity.

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<sup>37</sup> I thank Itamar Weinshtock Saadon for raising this objection.

In short, it is easy to see how moderate providence comes in degrees, but it is hard to see how divine appropriation comes in degrees. Therefore, Gellman's view easily explains the variation of degrees of divine revelation and Lebens's does not. As I mentioned in the introduction, Lebens (2020, 188–189) suggests combining his divine-appropriation-based theory with Gellman's moderate-providence-based theory. Perhaps God both exercises moderate providence over the development of Torah texts and appropriates those texts. But in that case, it is moderate providence, not divine appropriation, that does all the explanatory work with regard to the gradation of degrees of divine revelation.

I am sympathetic to the idea of combining moderate providence with divine appropriation. I think it is plausible that God appropriated the Torah tradition and thereby changed its meaning, as Lebens suggests that God could do by appropriating a humanly authored text as God's own. However, in contrast to Lebens, what I think plausibly constitutes the divine stamp of approval is not a theophany at Sinai. Goldschmidt (2019) and Lebens (2020, 189–198; 2022, chapter 13) use an argument called the Kuzari argument to try to show that it is plausible that a theophany occurred at Sinai. For reasons laid out by Gellman (2016, chapter 4; 2023, chapter 5), I am unconvinced by the Kuzari argument. Instead of a theophany at Sinai, what I think plausibly constitutes the divine stamp of approval for Torah, whereby God appropriates it as God's own and perhaps thereby changes its meaning, is the improbable survival of the Jewish people.<sup>38</sup> Because the survival of the Jewish people through the ages is an easily verifiable fact of history, I think it is a better candidate for playing the role of God's stamp of approval of the Torah process, whereby God appropriates it, than the theophany at Sinai, which, at best, is far less easily verifiable.

Although I think that it is plausible that God appropriated the Torah (in the broad sense of the entire written Torah and oral Torah), I should stress that, as I have argued, I think this plays no role in explaining why some Torah texts are more fully divinely revealed than others. Moderate providence is what does that.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Goldschmidt (2019, 223), Lebens (2022, 210–211) and Gellman (2023, 15–16) themselves remark on this amazing fact as a testament to God's role in Jewish history.

<sup>39</sup> This paper, in earlier versions, was presented at the 2024 meeting of the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism and discussed at a session of the Rutgers Center for the Philosophy of Religion reading group. I thank participants in both of those settings for feedback.

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