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BOOK REVIEW

Critical notice of Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *The people, the Torah, the God: a neo-traditional jewish theology*. Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023. 156 pp. $129.00 (hc)

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Abstract
In this critical review I outline the three main themes of Gellman's *The People*, *The Torah*, *The God*, and explore the extent to which it lives up to its subtitle, as a "neo-traditional Jewish Theology." The book is a summary of three volumes of Gellman's previous work. The summary and the trilogy make an important contribution to contemporary Jewish thought. On some matters, I argue, Gellman's thinking is more traditional than he realises. But irrespective of whether his theories live up to his own subtitle, they are eminently worthy of our attention.

Keywords Gellman · Judaism · Election · Revelation · Eschatology

Jerome Yehuda Gellman is one of the most creative, fecund, and important Jewish theologians alive today. He has recently written three books of striking significance. The first provided an account of the doctrine of the election of the Jewish people (Gellman, 2012). The second provided an account of revelation (Gellman, 2016). The final instalment was dedicated to the problem of evil (Gellman, 2019). Each volume of the trilogy deserves to be a standard of contemporary Jewish theology.

In his most recent book, *The People*, *The Torah*, *The God: A-Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology* (2023), Gellman provides us with a concise summary of his theological trilogy, with some minor revisions to reflect changes in his thought. Gellman is a student of Alvin Plantinga. If we compare Gellman's trilogy to Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), then we should compare this fourth volume to Plantinga's *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (2015) – that is to say, it is a concise, eminently readable, standalone summary of the more involved and complex work that came before it.

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The title of this book (and the book itself) has three parts, corresponding to the three books of which this book is a summary. The subtitle, "A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology," is an attempt to locate the author on the map of Jewish denominations. Gellman is, himself, a pious and religiously observant Jew, whose practices, and communal affiliation, place him squarely within the Orthodox camp. He is also a cognitivist about religious language, and a realist in his ontological commitments to the existence of a personal and providential God. These commitments set him apart from more liberal, and heterodox, streams of Jewish thought. More specifically, the content of his book is *traditional* because it defends three key beliefs that have always been central to Orthodox Judaism: that the Jews are God's chosen people, that the Torah is divine, and that the evils of this world do not undermine the claim that God is perfectly good. But Gellman takes his position to be somewhat revisionary – hence the "neo" – because he defends only a *qualified* version of each of these beliefs. He claims:

> that *in an important sense* the Jews are God's chosen; that *in an important sense* the Torah is divine; and that God is perfectly good and that we can still envision justification for at least a good measure of evil in the world.
>
> (Gellman, 2023, p. viii)

In this review, I will argue that some of Gellman's views are closer to the tradition than he avers. But all of his views are well worth a hearing, and the book itself comprises a cogent summary of a trilogy of excellent and substantive contributions to Jewish philosophical theology.

Election

In the late twentieth century, Michael Wyschogrod tried to defend the doctrine of the election as an almost inevitable cost of having a personal God. An *impersonal* God might love all people equally, but only if that love is somehow impersonal and impartial. A *personal* God, by contrast, would relate to each person differently, based on the particularities of each interaction. God loved Abraham with such passion, Wyschogrod argues, that he continues to love the Jewish people with a certain abandon, because "he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of [Abraham's] children" (Wyschogrod, 1983, p. 64). Jew and gentile alike, Wyschogrod urges, should be happy with this situation. In one of the passages that I find most disturbing, Wyschogrod states that every parent has a favourite child, before adding that:

> it is also true that a father loves all his children, so that they all know of and feel the love they receive, recognizing that to substitute an impartial judge for a loving father would eliminate the preference of the specially favored but would also deprive them all of a father. The mystery of Israel's election thus turns out to be the guarantee of the fatherhood of God towards all peoples, elect and nonelect, Jew and gentile.
>
> (Ibid., p. 65)

According to Wyschogrod, God has favourites. Because he does, we can trust that his love for his less favoured children is still a palpable phenomenon, rather than some sanitised impartial substitute for love.

Gellman's account of chosenness, by contrast, achieves the best of both worlds. He manages to make sense of a God whose love is personal, and yet, he avoids any commitment to divine favouritism. This is as it should be. I reject Wyschogrod's claim that every parent has a favourite. I love all of my children differently. So differently, perhaps, that to weigh up which I love most is both perverse and wrong-headed. Perverse, because comparisons would be reductive of something unquantifiable. Wrong-headed, because the loves are incommensurate.

Gellman claims that we must distinguish between "manifestly revealed love and less than manifestly revealed love" (Gellman, 2023, p. 24). If God revealed the full extent of his love to every single human, it would be overwhelming. Accordingly, God has selected just one people, whom he will overwhelm by more manifestly revealing His love for them. In so doing, all other human beings can catch a glimpse of the love that God has for everyone. Gellman writes:

> I can love two people perfectly equally, but for good reason reveal that love in a much more open and free manner to one rather than to the other, and for the good of the other. God loves all equally, all the time. God has made his love of the Jews more explicit, overwhelming them at Mt. Sinai, while giving indications of love for all.
>
> (Ibid., p. 24)

On Gellman's account, the election is something of a burden for the Jews. It includes the curses of the covenant, and the so-called *afflictions of love.* Moreover, there is, he says, "greatly more value in people coming close to God in freedom than in being coerced into relationship with God" (Ibid., p. 7). And yet, God wants all people to have some idea of the love he has for them, if only to encourage them "to turn to God in freedom, returning love to God" (Ibid., p. 8). Gellman calls this the *figurational* account of the election because all people on earth will witness, in God's relationship with the Jews, "a living *figuration* of God's present love of them and a *prefiguration* of God's obvious love for them," which will be more manifestly revealed in the eschaton (Ibid., pp. 8–9).

Is this arrangement fair? Is it fitting of a worship-worthy God? Is it likely to work? Has it worked to date? These questions all deserve careful thought. But let me turn to one question in particular: to what extent should we relate to Gellman's account as *neo*-traditional, and to what extent does it simply satisfy the desiderata that *any* traditional account of chosenness would have to satisfy?

The Biblical and Rabbinic data that one would have to process, in order to evaluate this question, is as vast as an ocean. A traditional account would have to marry together the vastly different metaphors and models that one can find in the tradition, deciding what to take literally, what to take as metaphor, where to place special emphasis, and what to place in the conceptual background. Gellman doesn't seriously engage in that project, neither in this book nor in his earlier work (i.e., Gellman, 2012).

My hunch is that Gellman's notion of *figuration* might well serve as a crucial breakthrough in any attempt to articulate a theory of the election, immune from xenophobia and from the spectre of divine favouritism, whilst fitting hand in glove with the weight of the Jewish tradition, once all of those metaphors and models have been appropriately treated, and counterbalanced. I imagine that figuration will be just *one* of the notions that a comprehensive traditional account of the election would require. But if that turns out to be the case, then Gellman potentially undersells his account as a contribution to a *neo*-traditional theology. Instead, he would have something to offer even to the most die-hard traditionalist.

Revelation

I cannot raise many concerns with Gellman's basic account of revelation because it's the account that, under his influence, I have come to hold for myself. Judaism is a religion, governed by Scripture. Scripture receives its authoritative interpretation through the Rabbinic tradition, as recorded in the Mishna and Talmud. Those texts also receive interpretations, from later Rabbinic authorities, in an ongoing process. So, even though the text of the Pentateuch is fixed, and taken to be inerrant, our *understanding* of that text, as it refracts through the unfolding of the Rabbinic tradition, is more dynamic. Gellman argues that the theological warrant for treating this evolving tradition as we do, stems from what he calls a process of "top-down moderate providence" (Gellman, 2023, ch. 6).

Imagine that Gellman is pouring sugar through a funnel into a bowl. When engaged in this activity, Gellman doesn't "attend to the micro-path of any granule of sugar at any time, yet," he says, "I see to it that the granules end up in the bowl" (Ibid., p. 93). Gellman doesn't direct each granule, and he doesn't much mind where exactly in the bowl any given granule ends up. All that matters is that the sugar, as a whole, ends up in the bowl, as a whole. In a similar way, God needn't intervene with the particular decisions of any given Rabbi, each one ruling as they see fit. The tradition is happy to accept that, at times, individual Rabbinic decisions may not go exactly as God would have chosen.[1] And yet, God can make sure that the general result, at a macro-level, looks right. All that needs to occur is a process of top-down moderate providence.

Where Gellman claims to *deviate* from the mainstream of traditional Jewish theology, is in his refusal to relate to the Hebrew Bible as a reliable source of historical knowledge. It can't be trusted to tell us how and when the world was created; when and whether there was an exodus from Egypt, and how large a number of people it involved, if it happened at all. This doesn't mean that Gellman rejects the Hebrew Bible. It's one thing to say that God was involved in writing a book. It's another thing to classify the *genre* of that book, so as to decide whether it should be trusted as a source of historical knowledge. On this issue, I would argue that Gellman overestimates the force of the archeological challenge to Biblical history. What's more, I think that he overestimates the extent to which his solution to that challenge is truly out of kilter with the tradition.

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia 59b.

According to Gellman, "the Egyptian setting in the early part of the book of Exodus is quite generic. There are no names of kings and little local coloring, which we would expect if the stories were accurate accounts of actual historical events" (Ibid., pp. 46–47). He cites a scholarly consensus that "most of the Exodus material was composed or collected long after the events, resulting in revisions that obscured the original stories" (Ibid., p. 46). He mentions in a footnote that Joshua Berman's recent book (Berman, 2020), came to Gellman's "attention too late" to be discussed in this work (Gellman, 2023, p. 47f). This is a great shame. Berman's book summarizes various scholarly articles in which he claims to uncover, in the Pentateuch itself, allusions to cultural, political, and literary features of life in Egypt, and in the ancient near east, that would have been almost impossible for any author to know, other than one living today, or at roughly the time of the alleged Exodus from Egypt.

Not only does Berman's well-argued theory undermine Gellman's claim that these events are described in a *generic* fashion, it also greatly bolsters the Kuzari argument, according to which the continuous transmission of the Exodus story, from the time of its occurrence until today, given certain facts about the content of that story, functions as evidence for the story's veridicality. Gellman dedicates an entire chapter to debunking the Kuzari argument (Ibid., ch. 5). He claims that the Exodus story may have taken many generations before it evolved into its current shape. But if Berman is correct, and the Pentateuch has a much earlier date of authorship than previously recognized, then the window in which such mutations may have occurred begins to vanish.

Gellman worries that, "There is no evidence of an Israelite wandering in the Sinai Desert, despite lengthy archeological surveys by Israeli archeologists" (Ibid., p. 50). Lack of evidence for some claim p is not evidence for the negation of p. But Gellman rightly suggests that such a large migration of people, over such a long time, would be expected to leave behind an archeological trace. And yet, "The strong expectation that *something* should show up has not been realized" (Ibid., p. 52). When the truth of p generates such an expectation, the lack of evidence for p really *can* function as evidence for p's negation.

And yet, Gellman gives short shrift to the suggestion that the "Sinai Desert of the Bible covered far more territory or was located somewhere other than our present "Sinai Desert"" (Ibid., p. 52f). He likewise sets aside "the little followed view that the Israelites' travels took them to Saudi Arabia and from there north" (Ibid.). Indeed, he relegates this entire issue to a footnote. I don't know what licenses such short shrift. We have no idea what the "Sea of Reeds" really refers to, and so we have no clue what body of water was supposedly crossed. Moreover, we know that place names in the ancient Near East would sometimes be swapped. "Persia" originally referred only to southwest Iran, and "Media" referred only to northwest Iran, but both terms were later, and at different times, used to refer to larger areas, overlapping with one another. Damascus has been both an Assyrian and an Aramean city, which also gives us some idea of the fluidity of ancient region names. It's not clear to me that we know where we should be looking for the evidence that Gellman rightly expects to find. Accordingly, I don't accept that the scale of the challenge from archeology is as pressing as Gellman makes out.

Gellman's response to the challenge is to regard the Hebrew Bible as sacred literature, but not as history. He takes this to be a major deviation from the received tradition. He writes:

> The Jewish people, and with them humanity at large, is living in a transformational era. We are entering a new age, gradually, fragmentally, and, I hope, responsibly, being called upon, among many other things, to recognize that the undermining of the historical reliability of the Torah is the culmination of gradual divine guidance away from the centrality of the historical content of the Torah as it appears.
>
> (Ibid., p. 90)

Like Gellman, I don't relate to scripture as a history book. But I would ask: how transformational is this view? In the pre-modern world, works of history were primarily written in order to instruct and inspire. For that reason, Jon E. Lendon advises us not to confuse the modern genre of history with what was called "history" in the ancient world. He writes:

> We have no useful category for the realm inhabited by ancient historical texts: rather than being "literature," the works of ancient historians came far closer to the modern genres of non-fiction novel or popular, non-academic history, where a degree of embroidery and imagination is layered upon a basis of fact.
>
> (Lendon, 2009, p. 57)

And thus, even if the Hebrew Bible was intended as a "history" of sorts, it would have been a contribution to a genre whose readers expected there to be plenty of "embroidery and imagination." They wouldn't have been expecting or demanding unadulterated historical accuracy.

I wonder what Gellman would have written had he been able to study Berman's work before publishing his own. Indeed, according to Berman:

> It is only with the rise of the academic discipline of history in the nineteenth century that the practice of annotation and citation of sources becomes *de rigueur*. These pre-modern writers were authorities not on account of their mastery of sources or extensive training in the methodology of historiography. Instead, the authority of these writers stemmed from their standing in the community. The stature and status of the historian in classical Rome was gained by dint of the offices he held, or the armies he commanded. Practical experience was what made one worthy of writing of the deeds of the past, not the mastery of research methodology. Their mandate was not to sift sources and to paint as accurate a picture of the past as possible, but rather to use what was known about the past to inspire and instruct.
>
> (Berman, 2020, p. 23)

According to Berman, the Bible's combining fact and fiction – its tendency to add embroidery and imagination upon a basis of fact – is totally unremarkable for a text

revealed when it was. It was equally unremarkable to the ancient Rabbis. That's why they never provided any sort of guidelines for figuring out which bits were fact and which bits were fiction. It's not a question that they would have asked:

> They certainly believed that the events reported in the [Scripture] had occurred. But they could not envision writing about the past in a way that aimed solely for factual representation and not exhortation and instruction… To foist these categories on these earlier generations of our Sages is to insist that they conceptualize in a way entirely foreign to them.
>
> (Ibid., p. 25)

Some people think of themselves as traditional, and yet they uncompromisingly take the Hebrew Bible to be, word for word, an accurate natural history of the universe. But this is a deeply *untraditional* attitude. Consequently, there's an important sense in which Gellman's approach is more in tune with the tradition than that of the so-called traditionalists.

Gellman is right that, once we relate to the Hebrew Bible, no longer as accurate history, the alleged challenge of archaeology becomes much less pressing. For example, Berman gives us literary reasons to think that the numbers that the Bible uses, to count the masses of Jews in the wilderness, would have been wildly inaccurate, and *wouldn't* have been taken literally by an ancient audience. Ancient population counts, Berman avers, were a well-worn literary device in the ancient world, and were not taken to be literal records of fact (Ibid., pp. 29–30; 45–52). If the tribe that left Egypt was much smaller, as Gellman concedes (2023, p. 52), then we have less reason to be flummoxed by the lack of archaeological evidence.

In other work, I have suggested one tool for figuring out when and how "historically accurate" elements can be isolated. Faced with a narrative or a story putatively about the distant past, an ancient audience, Berman helps us to see, would have been unlikely to evaluate it in terms of its historical accuracy:

> [B]ut faced with a story about them, in their own times, we can be more confident that a story wouldn't be widely received unless it was verifiable, or, at least, didn't make wildly inaccurate claims that could easily be repudiated. Consequently, nobody would have accepted that the entire nation witnessed a theophany, and continuously passed down its memory in an unbroken chain, such that their parents had already told it to them, unless that story was true.
>
> (Lebens, 2022, p. 230)

This, of course, is the central claim of the Kuzari argument. Now, I agree with Gellman that the Kuzari argument shouldn't be rationally compelling to atheists, or even to agnostics. But if you come to the table already believing in the existence of God, and if you're not wedded to the accuracy of the massive number of people enumerated in the Biblical account – perhaps you know that ancient audiences related even to contemporary population counts as an exercise in symbolism – then Kuzari like reasoning might make it reasonable to believe that there was some sort of experience, had by an entire generation of Israel's ancestors, that they interpreted as Divine salva-

tion from slavery, and as a theophany at Mt. Sinai. But isn't that just what Gellman actually accepts? Indeed, he says:

> On the intuitive level the Kuzari Argument has some force. It is striking that these stories proclaiming majestic miracles for an entire people have been accepted and retained for so many centuries. There must be something true behind them that thrust them forward into history.
>
> (Gellman, 2023, p. 82)

And if you already believe in a personal God, capable of overwhelming a people with love, then it's not so far-fetched to imagine that this "something true" might have been a theophany that kick-started the top-down moderate providential process that we recognise as revelation. In other words, the Kuzari argument still does some important work.

Eschatology

In order to alleviate at least some elements of the problem of evil, Gellman appeals to a dazzling array of metaphysical speculations, including reincarnation from life to life, across an array of multiple worlds, within a giant multiverse. Of course, these fascinating ruminations cannot be described as *traditional*. Having said that, they certainly draw from resources that the Jewish tradition makes available to its more creative theologians, and this is the most creative part of Gellman's book.

The beauty of Jewish eschatology, like much of Jewish philosophy, is that the contours of acceptability are widely cast. The Torah and the sages don't tell us too much about the afterlife, and it is up to philosophers and theologians to sketch the various possibilities that the tradition could support. I have nothing against wackiness when it comes to metaphysics and eschatology. Indeed, I'm pretty sure that whatever the underlying metaphysical facts that undergird our reality turn out to be, those facts will be counter-intuitive. The world is a weird place. The multiverse that Gellman describes is weird in the most wonderful ways.

The only element of Gellman's eschatology that I take to be out of kilter with the tradition is his suggestion that the messianic age takes place in some other world, or collection of worlds, at which we'll all arrive (Ibid., p. 123). I take this to be more than a deviation from the tradition. This is a deviation from one of the most important messages of the Hebrew Bible: *viz. this* broken world is the one that can and will ultimately be healed. Gellman salvages something of that hope, with his claim that all souls end up in some messianic world or other. Perhaps that's enough. After all, those messianic worlds are part of this very multiverse in which we allegedly live. And yet, it seems to me that the Hebrew Bible's hope is more radical. We don't wish to find ourselves in some other world. Instead, we believe that this very world, despite its fractures, can be healed. And thus, this is the one place where I'll concede that Gellman's neo-traditional theology is less that fully traditional.

Other than how seriously to take the challenge from archaeology, and my preference for an eschatology that centres on this world (rather than on this multiverse),

there is very little in Gellman's book, with which I take issue. In fact, the central arguments of this critical notice have all been concerned with a higher-order concern about how to classify Gellman's views. This is perhaps one of the most interesting features of philosophising within a religious tradition. On the one level there are the substantive theories and claims that the philosopher will argue for and defend. On the next level, there is the question as to how and whether those theories, claims, and arguments, cohere with the tradition in question. What I can say, with certainty, is this: Gellman's book and the trilogy that came before it, make an essential contribution to Jewish theology – traditional or otherwise.

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