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May 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Geoffrey P. (2014) "The Political Function of Revelation: Lessons from the Hebrew Bible," *Touro Law Review*: Vol. 30 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview/vol30/iss1/7>

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## The Political Function of Revelation: Lessons from the Hebrew Bible

Cover Page Footnote

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## THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF REVELATION: LESSONS FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

Geoffrey P. Miller\*

*Abstract: This article examines the political theory of revelation in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the theophany at Sinai. Revelation occurs when God communicates information to human beings. The biblical narratives use the modality of a revelation to signal the importance of the message being conveyed. They also identify techniques for limiting revelation's destabilizing potential: embedding, which restricts God's ability to change his mind; authentication, which tests the validity of revelations; and access rules which privilege political elites as recipients of God's word.*

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In recent years, scholars have convincingly argued that the Hebrew Bible incorporates a remarkable compendium of information, ideas, and speculative thought about issues in political theory – the nature of political obligation; the rights and obligations of kings; even the need for a balanced government and a system of separation of powers.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides additional evidence for the presence of sophisticated political ideas in the Hebrew Bible. In particular, this paper examines the Bible's treatment of revelation.

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\* Stuyvesant Comfort Professor, New York University Law School. I thank Samuel Levine for helpful comments and Bernard Levinson, Joshua Berman, Ehud Ben Zvi, Calum Carmichael and others who have stimulated me to ponder issues of political theory in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., JOSHUA BERMAN, *CREATED EQUAL: HOW THE BIBLE BROKE WITH ANCIENT POLITICAL THOUGHT* (2008); BERNARD M. LEVINSON, *DEUTERONOMY AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF BIBLICAL INNOVATION* (1998); David C. Flatto, *The King and I: Separation of Powers in Early Hebraic Political Theory*, 20 *YALE J.L. & HUMAN.* 61 (2008). My own contributions to this literature include GEOFFERY P. MILLER, *WAYS OF A KING: LEGAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS IN THE BIBLE* (2011).

Revelation, as I use the term, refers to cases in which God discloses information to human beings. Revelation is one of two means by which God acts to influence history;<sup>2</sup> the other is direct intervention (e.g., when God parts the Sea of Reeds or destroys Sodom and Gomorrah).<sup>3</sup> Unlike direct intervention, revelation does not trump human agency; the subject of the revelation is not compelled to act on or believe the information he has received. Instances of revelation are found throughout the Bible: God reveals his will to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; to Cain and Noah in the Dark Age; to the ancestors of Israel during the Patriarchal Age; to Moses, Aaron, and others during the conflict with Pharaoh and the wanderings in the desert; to judges under the tribal confederacy; and to kings, prophets and seers during the monarchy.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly of all, God reveals himself repeatedly and communicates most directly with human agents in the account of the events on Mount Sinai.

It should be evident that revelation, pregnant as it is with theological significance, also has a political dimension. To the extent that God uses revelation to instruct human beings on how to act or not to act, those instructions have political content. Because they are the word of God, they are legitimate rules that all of God's subjects must obey. The author's challenge in dealing with the topic of revelation is not to argue that the expressed will of God is legitimate and binding. If the intention truly is that of God, it controls by definition. No justification is required – a point made in the Garden of Eden story, in which God's injunction not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is presented as valid merely because God said it.<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion that the will of God is binding on his people, however, does not resolve all the issues associated with revelation. The topic of revelation is problematic, not because there is any doubt as to the legitimacy of God's word, but rather because revelation is a wild card. While revelation has the signal advantage that it requires

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g. *id.*; *Exodus* 14:26-31. The implicit assumption in all these cases is that there is a course that history would follow if God did not act. If God stays out of the picture, in other words, history will not stop; it will follow its own intrinsic logic. This is the implication of God's vow in *Genesis* 8:22: "While the earth stands, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall keep their course unaltered." *Genesis* 8:22. When God intervenes in history, the effect is to interrupt the course which events would take if left on their own.

<sup>3</sup> *Exodus* 14:26-31; *Genesis* 19:1-11, 23-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis* 2:15-17, 19, 6:1-4; *Exodus* 32; 1 *Kings* 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Genesis* 2:16-17.

no justification beyond the fact that God has spoken, it presents serious problems of instability. God can always countermand the dictates or statutes of any human ruler, no matter how powerful. He can even rescind or revise his own prior revelation. Revelation, moreover, in theory is no respecter of persons. Because God cannot be limited by human law, he can appear to anyone – king, priest, or commoner alike. These features make revelation a potent potential force for destabilizing existing power structures because it can provide critics with a basis for opposing the incumbent authorities.

History provides numerous examples of outsiders who used claims of revelation as a basis for attacking existing political arrangements: consider Joan of Arc, a peasant woman who received instructions from God to lead the French in battle against the English during the Hundred Years War; the Prophet Muhammad, whose revelations formed the basis for attacks on religious and political authorities of his time, or Jesus of Nazareth, whose revelations concerned Roman officials who viewed them as incitements to insurrection. A related form of instability occurs when a leader uses a claim of revelation to challenge the exclusive right of the incumbent authorities to interpret scripture; such claims were made in different ways by Gautama Shakyamuni in the Fifth Century BCE, Jesus of Nazareth in the First Century CE, and Martin Luther and Guru Nanak in the Sixteenth Century CE. Like Muhammad, each of these figures founded great religious movements; but their activities were not necessarily welcomed by the existing authorities of their times.

The bible itself recounts instances of destabilizing revelation. Ahijah gives Jeroboam the bad news of the eventual destruction of his kingdom;<sup>6</sup> Jehu prophesizes against Baasha;<sup>7</sup> an unnamed prophet prophesizes against Ahab.<sup>8</sup> In each of these cases, the judgment of God was against a king of the Northern Kingdom, reflecting the sentiments of the author, who was a partisan of the Davidic dynasty in the South. But even though the author endorses the messages of these prophets, the stories of their activities underscore the potential of revelation for destabilizing existing power structures. Despite its advantages, revelation must be constrained by limitations that prevent it from becoming a license for anarchy.

This paper will argue that elements of the Bible's revelation

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<sup>6</sup> 1 *Kings* 14:5-16.

<sup>7</sup> 1 *Kings* 16:1-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 20:35-43.

texts serve this purpose of counteracting the potential destabilizing effects of revelation. Part I examines the media God uses to reveal himself; these details provide stability by signaling the importance and scope of the revelation in question. Part II describes strategies that the Bible uses to constrain God's ability to change his mind – to minimize the risk that revelation will result in random or destructive changes in God's commands. Part III considers methods for authenticating the veracity of claims to revelation. Part IV examines access rules which limit claims of revelation by persons not part of the political elite.

## I. MODALITIES

A notable feature of revelation narratives is the extraordinary variety of means that God uses to communicate to human beings:

1. God transmits information through diverse media. He communicates through the Urim and Thummim, the casting of lots, and other forms of divination.<sup>9</sup> He appears in dreams<sup>10</sup> and in the dark of night.<sup>11</sup> He speaks in thunder<sup>12</sup> and as a disembodied voice.<sup>13</sup> He communicates through prophets, angels and spirits.<sup>14</sup> He appears in clouds,<sup>15</sup> a burning bush,<sup>16</sup> and sometimes in his own body.<sup>17</sup>

God, in short, has a choice of media and must elect which one to use according to some principle of selection. He is like a politician who uses many different methods for communicating: television, radio, newspapers, magazines, telephone, fax, e-mail, Twitter postings, speeches, in-person meetings, statements by aides and so on. These communications do not occur at random; they are chosen for their symbolism and effect. Obviously some communications have more impact than others: a Twitter message has less impact for the recipient than an in-person meeting in the Oval Office. It is evident that

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., 1 Samuel 28:6; Numbers 26:52-55, 27:21; Proverbs 16:33, 18:18. See generally Michael Fishbane, *Revelation and Tradition: Aspects of Inner-Biblical Exegesis*, 99 J. BIBLICAL LITERATURE 343, 343-61 (1980) (discussing oracles as a form of revelation).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Genesis 15:12-14, 28:12.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 15:17; 1 Samuel 3.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 19:16, 19.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Genesis 4:6, 6:13, 12:1, 15:1.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 16:7-11; Numbers 22:22-35; Judges 2:4; 1 Kings 22:20-22.

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 19:9.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 3:2.

<sup>17</sup> See *id.* at 24:9-11, 33:18-23, 34:5-6.

the Bible reflects a similar principle: the media for revealing the word of God are not all of equal dignity. Oracles and divination do not have the same stature as personal communications; communications through angels are not as portentous as direct interventions by God himself; God's disembodied voice is not as awesome as his voice accompanied by some manifestation of his physical being. The biblical media of revelation reflect an implicit ordering along the dimension of stature or importance.

We may infer, therefore, that the medium itself is part of the message. When the author recounts an instance of revelation, he usually associates it with a description of the means by which the message is communicated. Even when the author is not specific about the means employed, the association remains because the reader assumes from the lack of specificity that there was nothing particularly special about the communication. The means of communication supplies information about the importance of the message: in general, the more dignified the medium, the more important the message.<sup>18</sup>

2. Another dimension along which divine manifestations differ is that of space. God appears in many different places – near rivers,<sup>19</sup> in deserts,<sup>20</sup> in cities,<sup>21</sup> even in territory ruled by foreign potentates serving other gods.<sup>22</sup> But God displays a special preference for certain locations. He seems to be a creature of habit who likes to return to his familiar haunts, such as the Garden of Eden, which seems to have been a favorite strolling place in primeval times.<sup>23</sup> Places where God has appeared become sanctuaries or shrines where sacrifices are performed, apparently for the purpose of attracting his attention there again.<sup>24</sup>

Among God's favorite spots, the most important seem to be mountains. God appears to Moses on Mount Horeb, to Moses and

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that the author is completely consistent in his choice of media. Consider the different approaches taken to birth annunciations. God appears to Hagar through an angel. *Genesis* 16:7-12, 21:17-18. Sarah receives the annunciation of Isaac's birth by overhearing from her tent a conversation between an angel and her husband. *Id.* at 18:10-12. God speaks directly to Rebekah when he announces the birth of Jacob and Esau. *Id.* at 25:21-23.

<sup>19</sup> *See, e.g., Joshua* 4:1-3.

<sup>20</sup> *See, e.g., Exodus* 16.

<sup>21</sup> *See, e.g., Genesis* 19.

<sup>22</sup> *See, e.g., id.*

<sup>23</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 3:8.

<sup>24</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 28:18-21 (Bethel), *Genesis* 12:6-7 (Shechem); *Joshua* 5:9 (Gilgal); 1 *Samuel* 3:19-21 (Shiloh).

others on Mount Sinai, to Noah on Mount Ararat – and, from the standpoint of the reader in biblical times, also resides on Mount Zion in the temple of Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> Mountains are one narrative element which the author uses to convey the idea of altitude (others are manifestations in the sky such as rainbows, clouds, lightning or smoke). Altitude, in turn, is important because it conveys a concept of generality derived from principles of line-of-sight. A person standing low to the ground has poor line-of-sight attributes: he cannot see far at all, and he cannot be seen from other low-lying places. Someone placed high up, on the other hand, has good line-of-sight attributes: he can see and be seen from a much broader area. These principles were common knowledge in ancient times – even more so than today given that people of those days did not have technologies to supplement visual perception. Moses is attracted to the burning bush on Mount Horeb because it is in his line-of-sight.<sup>26</sup> Jesus refers to the same concept when he describes his disciples as a “city on a hill.”<sup>27</sup>

As in the case of the media used for revelation, it is evident that the author carefully selects the location for revelation. Revelations which occur in specially sanctified locations, such as those later occupied by shrines, have greater dignity than those which occur at other locations, or where the location of the revelation is not specified. Especially significant are revelations that occur on mountains because of the generality implied by the location. A revelation which occurs on a mountain is, by implication, relevant to the line-of-sight of the mountain; symbolically, it is relevant to a larger group than the person or persons who are specifically selected to receive the message. Thus, the location of the revelation, like the medium used for its communication, contributes to the message: revelations that occur on divinely favored ground, and especially revelations occurring on holy mountains, enjoy greater dignity than revelations that occur elsewhere, and thus signal that the message being communicated is especially important and noteworthy.

3. Some revelations are accompanied by unusual physical or supernatural phenomena. No extraordinary events occur when angels come to announce the future birth of Isaac.<sup>28</sup> But other revelations are accompanied by impressive displays: the flaming torch that ap-

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<sup>25</sup> *Exodus* 3:1-2, 19:18; *Genesis* 8:4; *Isaiah* 8:18.

<sup>26</sup> *Exodus* 3:1-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Matthew* 5:14.

<sup>28</sup> *Genesis* 18:1-15.



pears to Abraham in Genesis;<sup>29</sup> the burning bush that appears to Moses on Mount Horeb;<sup>30</sup> the lightning, clouds, thunder, fire, smoke and trumpet blasts on Mount Sinai.<sup>31</sup> While the lack of unusual manifestations does not necessarily signal the unimportance of the message – no spectacular displays are reported when God appears to Abraham to announce his wonderful destiny<sup>32</sup> – the presence of such phenomena does indicate that the message is especially noteworthy. When God acts to fundamentally change political arrangements, as with the revelations to Moses on Horeb and Sinai, the author unleashes the full monty of special effects in order to underscore the significance of what has happened.<sup>33</sup>

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We may summarize the analysis with the following general principle: *the extent of God's presence manifested during a revelation is directly proportional to the importance of the message being conveyed.* This principle highlights the revelations that require fundamental political change. The revelation to Moses on Horeb includes several elements which signify that the event is significant – an extended conversation with God on a holy mountain accompanied by a pyrotechnical display.<sup>34</sup> Even more impressive is the revelation on Sinai, where all the elements are present to the highest degree: a massive display of God's presence; a mountain that appears to be one of God's own residences; and spectacular demonstrations of sound, vision and light that fill the narrative like an Imax screen.<sup>35</sup> By supplying these details, the author emphasizes the fundamental importance of these events, and, in the case of Sinai, claims for it a constitutive role in the history of the Israelite people that is recounted in the narratives that follow.

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<sup>29</sup> *Id.* 15:17-21.

<sup>30</sup> *Exodus* 3:1-2.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 19:16-19.

<sup>32</sup> *Genesis* 17:15-21.

<sup>33</sup> *Exodus* 3, 19:16-25, 20:2-26.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 20:1-21.

## II. EMBEDDING

The author recognizes that God has the power to change his mind at any time, and therefore the power to undo or reverse the impact of any previous revelation. God does in fact change his mind. When he sees the evil that men have done during the Dark Age, he decides to destroy most of his creation.<sup>36</sup> In the golden calf episode, God vows to destroy the Israelites despite his promise to make them into a great nation;<sup>37</sup> when Moses objects, he changes his mind again.<sup>38</sup> God sanctions the anointment of Saul as king over Israel, but repents when he observes that Saul is unworthy for the task.<sup>39</sup>

The danger of divine inconsistency is that it tends to reduce or obviate the value of revelation at providing a stable form of social control. Taken to the extreme, the will of God becomes like that of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>40</sup>: if the person in power capriciously orders that people's heads be chopped off, without any rhyme or reason, no one will know how to behave even if they are in deadly fear; in fact, the Queen's orders are routinely ignored by her soldiers, probably for that very reason.<sup>41</sup> The problem is similar to that faced by Jean Bodin and other absolutist philosophers of later European tradition, and a reason why, despite arguing for the unfettered power of kings, they sometimes tempered their arguments by recommending that kings rule according to law even though not required to do so.<sup>42</sup>

The biblical author uses several strategies to deal with the problem of divine inconsistency.

1. One strategy is to assert that it is not in God's nature to wave or to change. Numbers 23:19 states, through Balaam: "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind? Does he speak and then not act, does he promise

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<sup>36</sup> *Genesis* 6:6-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Exodus* 32:9-10.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 32:11-14.

<sup>39</sup> *1 Samuel* 15:35.

<sup>40</sup> LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* (MacMillian & Co., Ltd. 1920) (1898) (commonly referred to as *Alice in Wonderland*).

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 125, 138-39.

<sup>42</sup> *See, e.g.*, JEAN BODIN, *SIX BOOKS OF THE COMMONWEALTH* 27-28, 32 (M. J. Tooley trans., 1955); ELISABETH ZOLLER, *INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC LAW: A COMPARATIVE STUDY* 47 (2008).

and not fulfill?”<sup>43</sup> In strikingly similar language, Samuel says that “he who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.”<sup>44</sup> Since God is not prone to change his mind, there is little danger that a revelation once given will subsequently be rescinded or revised. Where God does change his mind, there is usually an exceptionally good reason. Thus, he decides to destroy the world only after he concludes that the mind of human beings is not just flawed, but fundamentally evil from birth.<sup>45</sup> The suggestion is that, had the provocation been less severe, God would not have deviated from his original course.

2. A second strategy for dealing with the risk of divine inconsistency is the use of covenants. The covenant relationship between God and man is problematic because of the nature of the obligations imposed; it is one thing for God to impose obligations on man, but quite another for him to impose obligations on himself. Since God is free to change his mind, and therefore can break any promises he makes, what is added when God makes a covenant?

Notwithstanding the logic of this observation, the author clearly implies that when God makes a covenant, he places himself under a special obligation not to breach its terms. When God conveys the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendents, the covenant is sealed by a ritual involving the division of animals and the passage of a smoking firepot.<sup>46</sup> The sealing of the covenant in some manner binds God to the faithful observance of its terms. When the covenant involves future performance, the binding force is expressed in the concept of memory.<sup>47</sup> God places the rainbow in the sky to remind him of the promise he has made to Noah and the other survivors of the Flood.<sup>48</sup> Whenever he sees the rainbow he will remember his promise to never destroy the earth again.<sup>49</sup> By formalizing a promise in a covenant, God commits himself not to subsequently change his mind. As God puts it in Judges 2:1, “I will never break my covenant with you.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Numbers* 23:19 (New International Version).

<sup>44</sup> *1 Samuel* 15:29 (New International Version).

<sup>45</sup> *Genesis* 6:5-7.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 15:9-21.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 9:9-17.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 9:14-17.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 9:14-15.

<sup>50</sup> *Judges* 2:1 (New International Version).

In cases where God appears to violate a covenant, the author takes pains to assert that he has not, in fact, done so.<sup>51</sup> Phrased in terms of contemporary contract law, the author's claim is that God's failure to perform is not a breach of covenant because his performance is excused by a prior material breach by his human counterparty.<sup>52</sup> Thus, God's failure to fulfill his promise to drive the Canaanites out of the Promised Land is not due to God's inconstancy, but rather due to the Israelites' prior failure to fulfill their part of the bargain by not destroying the Canaanite altars.<sup>53</sup> God's rejection of Saul, likewise, is not a breach of any promises to the Israelites or to Saul, but rather is due to Saul's own failure to carry out the obligations of holy war by utterly destroying the Amalekites.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, God contemplates repudiating his promise to make Israel a great nation in the golden calf episode, although he is ultimately dissuaded by Moses.<sup>55</sup> Had God carried out this plan, the author implies that the act would not have been a breach of covenant because the Israelites' worship of the idol released God from any obligation to fulfill his promises to them.<sup>56</sup>

3. God's freedom of action is also constrained by his desire to avoid criticism and maintain appearances.<sup>57</sup> This may seem like a strange motivation to attribute to a deity, but the author clearly implies that God is, in fact, influenced by a wish to burnish his reputation.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when God vows to punish the Israelites in the golden calf episode, Moses suggests that if God punishes the Israelites, it will give the Egyptians a chance to impugn his motivation for the Exodus: "[w]hy should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people."<sup>59</sup> Moses also reminds God of his promises to the Israelite people with the not-so-subtle suggestion that if God repudiates those promises, he will also render himself vulner-

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<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 2:2.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 2:1-2.

<sup>54</sup> 1 *Samuel* 15:11,18-19, 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Exodus* 32:7-14.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 32:7-8.

<sup>57</sup> See YOCHANAN MUFFS, LOVE & JOY: LAW, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL 13 (1992).

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> *Exodus* 32:10-12 (New International Version).

able to denigrating stories circulated by his enemies.<sup>60</sup> Yochanan Muffs explains the implication as follows:

[c]ould it be that God is not as trustworthy as an ordinary human being? When an ordinary mortal writes a deed of gift or a deed of sale or a general contract, he has no right to go back on his word. But the Holy One, Blessed Be He, writes out a deed, enters into a covenant, and before the ink is dry, He reneges on His word.<sup>61</sup>

God cannot act in such an arbitrary way; if he did, he would not be the God he claims to be.

4. Even if God wished to rescind or modify a revelation, he would not do so without due process. God does not act arbitrarily and does not catch his favored ones by surprise.<sup>62</sup> Instead, he briefs his people in advance about his intentions.<sup>63</sup> For example, before attacking Sodom and Gomorrah, God warns Abraham and allows him to intercede.<sup>64</sup> Before destroying the Israelites in the golden calf episode, God alerts Moses as to his plans and allows Moses to dissuade him from his path.<sup>65</sup> Prophets expect advance warning, even on minor matters, and are surprised when they do not get it.<sup>66</sup> Thus, even if God wished to change the words of some revelation he has previously given, he would certainly alert his subjects in advance and afford them an opportunity to object.

5. At least judged by number of words, the majority of biblical revelations take the form of laws. This is not an accident. God consistently manifests a reluctance to intervene unnecessarily in human affairs. While revelations are common, they are infrequent in light of the enormous span of history being recounted (assuming that the author reports a reasonable percentage of them). God's habit of not intervening traces back to Genesis 1-2, which describe him as resting after creating the universe, and Genesis 2-3 which portray him as creating human beings to till the Garden of Eden for him and de-

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<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 32:13.

<sup>61</sup> MUFFS, *supra* note 57, at 13.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Amos* 3:7.

<sup>64</sup> *Genesis* 18:20-21.

<sup>65</sup> *Exodus* 32:7-14.

<sup>66</sup> *2 Kings* 4:27.

scribe him strolling in the Garden in the cool of the day.<sup>67</sup> God likes to relax and not work too hard, and thus, prefers strategies that reduce the burden of managing the human race.

God's reluctance to intervene in history tends to push his interventions in the direction of promulgating general laws rather than acting directly in history. The reason is that direct actions require continuous monitoring and action, whereas, the promulgation of laws is a one-time event. Once a law has been promulgated, God is unlikely to alter it because the law is a general prescription for behavior. Given that it is general, if God gets it right the first time, he never has to change it. The consequence is that the laws themselves are likely to be highly durable. Thus, the destabilizing potential of revelation is minimized. In fact, the bible does not report any instances in which God actually changes a law once it was promulgated.

God does, of course, have to monitor human beings to make sure that they *comply* with the law. Many of God's interventions in history are, in fact, based on his having apprehended some human character violating a divine decree. But intervening to punish individual violations of a general law is not fundamentally destabilizing because the law itself remains constant. God, meanwhile, can reduce the burden of law enforcement by checking on human beings only occasionally. This strategy should not reduce compliance if the penalty for violations is sufficiently high.<sup>68</sup> In fact, God might be seen to use such a strategy. Many kings of Israel and Judah do evil deeds, yet suffer no apparent sanction, possibly because they have not been caught. But even small deviations from God's commands, if detected, can generate severe punishments; examples include Saul's loss of the kingship, a punishment for failing to fully comply with God's instruction that he eradicate the Amalekites,<sup>69</sup> or Moses being denied the privilege of entering the Promised Land, the result of a technical violation of God's command about how to produce water out of rocks.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Genesis* 1-3.

<sup>68</sup> See Gary Becker, *Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach*, 76 *J. POL. ECON.* 169, 169-217 (1968).

<sup>69</sup> 1 *Samuel* 15:10-23.

<sup>70</sup> *Numbers* 20:8,12.

**III. AUTHENTICATION**

Claims of revelation are potentially destabilizing, not only because God can change his mind, but also because the report of the revelation may be false. Such reports can be inaccurate in two ways: the purported recipient may be lying about what he has seen or heard, or the recipient may be telling the truth, but what he has seen or heard may not represent the actual will of God. In either case, the false claim of revelation can cause serious harm if it is credited and acted upon.

The bible recognizes that claimed revelations could be false.<sup>71</sup> Deuteronomy sternly warns against “any prophet who . . . presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to say.”<sup>72</sup> Such men are to be killed.<sup>73</sup> False prophets were a concern also in New Testament times; Jesus warned that many such individuals would arise, and some Jews undoubtedly considered Jesus himself to fall into that very category.<sup>74</sup> A theory of revelation, accordingly, must provide some filter or means of testing a claim of revelation for veracity.

The problem of distinguishing true and false revelation can prove dicey. Because the person who is asked to assess the credibility of a revelation has not had the experience himself, he must rely on his own senses and his own judgment in evaluating the truth or falsity of the claim. Meanwhile, the costs of error are high. Acting on a false revelation can result in disastrous misjudgments; but failing to act on a true revelation can be equally catastrophic.

1 Kings 22<sup>75</sup> is a banner illustration. Ahab king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah meet in Israel to plan a joint military operation to recover Ramoth Gilead from the king of Aram.<sup>76</sup> Before launching the mission, they decide to seek an oracle.<sup>77</sup> Ahab gathers 400 prophets, all of whom advise that the operation will succeed.<sup>78</sup> Apparently, however, none of these prophets gets his information

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<sup>71</sup> See, e.g., *Isaiah* 44:25; *Jeremiah* 14:14, 23:16, 28:1-17; *Ezekiel* 13, 21:29; 22:28.

<sup>72</sup> *Deuteronomy* 18:18-22, 13:1-3.

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* at 13:5, 18:20.

<sup>74</sup> *Matthew* 7:15, 24:11.

<sup>75</sup> *1 Kings* 22.

<sup>76</sup> *Id.* at 2-4.

<sup>77</sup> *Id.* at 5-6.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* at 6.

from Yahweh.<sup>79</sup> Jehoshaphat, recognizing this fact, asks if there are any prophets of Yahweh in Israel.<sup>80</sup> Ahab says that there is one, Micaiah, but complains that he never has anything good to say.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, Micaiah is duly sent for and privately told to go along with the others. Somewhat to the reader's surprise, he complies.<sup>82</sup> When pressed by a suspicious Ahab, however, Micaiah changes his story.<sup>83</sup> Now he claims that God has actually sent a spirit to the 400 prophets in order to entice Ahab to go to his death in battle.<sup>84</sup> Ahab jails Micaiah on bread and water, goes into battle, and is killed by a stray arrow.<sup>85</sup> This story demonstrates how complicated it can be to sort between true and false prophesy: false prophets truthfully report a divine vision, which itself proves to be false; a true prophet falsely reports the same false vision; and a true prophet truthfully reports a true vision. Left to try and sort things out, Ahab and Jehoshaphat follow the majority opinion, with fatal consequences for Israel's king.<sup>86</sup>

Given these problems with verification, there is obviously a high premium on lie-detector tests that can sort between true and false revelations. The author identifies several such tests:

1. God sometimes provides a *curriculum vitae*, which attests to his bona fides when he introduces himself to the recipient. So, when he appears to Abraham, he declares himself as "God Almighty."<sup>87</sup> To Jacob, he says "I am the Lord, . . . the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."<sup>88</sup> Meeting Moses at the burning bush, he announces: "I am the God thy father [], the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob."<sup>89</sup>

The attestations here include the two sorts of information one expects to see in a resume. They contain general facts bearing on God's overall qualifications and experience. By identifying himself as a deity, God claims to have the potency to perform mighty acts of salvation. Sometimes, in addition to claiming divinity, God asserts

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<sup>79</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>80</sup> 1 *Kings* 22:7-8.

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>83</sup> *Id.* at 16-19.

<sup>84</sup> *Id.* at 20-22.

<sup>85</sup> 1 *Kings* 22:27, 34, 37.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.* at 41-45.

<sup>87</sup> *Genesis* 17:1.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.* at 28:13 (New International Version).

<sup>89</sup> *Exodus* 3:6 (New International Version).



his potency in more specific terms, either by making wonderful promises about the future<sup>90</sup> or by reminding his interlocutors of the mighty acts he has done in the past.<sup>91</sup> In addition to these general qualifications, God's resume also contains specific information pertinent to the needs of the job in question: he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and therefore uniquely qualified, among all the supernatural powers, to act as the Israelites' sponsor. It is as if a person is applying for a job as a chemical engineer: the applicant's resume will contain general information attesting to the person's overall qualifications and abilities (graduation from a prestigious school, good grades, excellence in sports and community service, etc.) and also her special qualifications for the job (educational focus, prior jobs in chemical engineering and so on). God is not applying for a job with Moses; but Moses is nevertheless placed in a position in which he must size up the bona fides of the being who is speaking to him. God's recitation of his background and qualifications provides help in Moses' deliberations.

2. Another sort of authentication occurs when the deity communicates private information, which would not be known to ordinary mortals. For example, God tells Moses that he has heard the cries of the Israelites who are suffering in Egypt.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps the oppression would have become known, even in Midian, but God's knowledge of the Israelites' condition is a factor tending to vouch for his credibility, as is the means by which God claims to know this fact (God did not find out from a wayfarer and did not personally visit Egypt, but rather "heard the cries" of the oppressed people, implying that he descended from above).<sup>93</sup>

Even more pertinent is the fact that God knows who Moses is. God's knowledge of intimate details about Moses – his name, his background, the identity and name of his brother, and the fact that his brother was already on his way to meet Moses in the wilderness – attests to God's supernatural powers, since it is highly unlikely that any ordinary mortal would possess such detailed information about a stranger they met in the wilderness.<sup>94</sup> In addition to vouching for his bona fides, God's knowledge of Moses' personal biography tends to

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<sup>90</sup> *Exodus* 3:8, 6:6-8, 34:10; *Leviticus* 20:24.

<sup>91</sup> *Exodus* 15:26, 9:4.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 3:7.

<sup>93</sup> *Id.* at 3:7-10.

<sup>94</sup> *Id.* at 3:2-5.

validate his good intentions.<sup>95</sup>

3. A third test of the validity of a revelation is the fact that it may be accompanied by unusual phenomena – exaggerated natural conditions or supernatural manifestations. Most instances of revelation in the Bible display this feature, at least to some extent. Even if God merely speaks to a person, without other unusual manifestations, the fact that a person hears a disembodied voice is itself indicative that something unusual is afoot.

At other times, the special effects can be more pronounced. God appears to Moses in a burning bush. The phenomenon of burning bushes may have been known in biblical times; wildfires probably set off spectacular flares, visible from a long way off, when they reached bushes growing in the scrublands. To that extent, the phenomenon of the burning bush may have resonated with folk legend and popular belief. But normal bush fires would have lasted only a few minutes; the one that Moses encounters burns and is not consumed. The supernatural effect is obvious both to the reader and to the protagonist of the drama, substantiating the fact that the voice speaking to Moses from the bush must be that of a supernatural being. The validation of revelation through special effects is even more pronounced in the theophany at Sinai, where the people observe an impressive *son et lumière* display that could only be the product of a powerful God.<sup>96</sup>

4. Another probative detail is the reaction of the recipient of the revelation. When God appears to Abraham in Genesis 15, it is evident that Abraham does not immediately know who is talking with him.<sup>97</sup> He apparently quakes with fear at the manifestation, resulting in God's reassuring statement: "[h]ave no fear, Abram. I am here to protect thee; thy reward shall be great indeed."<sup>98</sup> Abraham "put his faith in God" – a statement that would not be necessary if Abraham had not initially nurtured doubts.<sup>99</sup> God offers further reassurance by introducing himself as the God who brought Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and who will give him the Promised Land.<sup>100</sup> Even so, Abraham demands additional reassurance: "what assurance may I

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<sup>95</sup> *Id.* at 3:17.

<sup>96</sup> *Exodus* 19:11.

<sup>97</sup> *Genesis* 15:1.

<sup>98</sup> *Id.* (New International Version).

<sup>99</sup> *Id.* at 15:6 (New International Version).

<sup>100</sup> *Id.* at 15:7.

have, that it is mine?"<sup>101</sup> God tells Abraham to cut several animals in half and, in the dark of night, manifests a smoking firepot with a blazing torch to pass between the parts (an apparent reference to the two kingdoms of Israel during monarchic times).<sup>102</sup> The emphasis on the authenticity of this theophany is due to the subject matter in question. Because this conveyance of the Promised Land purported to cut off claims of other groups, the author deemed it necessary to provide explicit verification of the validity of the revelation.

Moses also is subtly skeptical about the veracity of the revelation at the burning bush. He is initially attracted to the site out of pure curiosity.<sup>103</sup> Although he complies with God's demand that he remove his sandals out of respect for the sacred ground,<sup>104</sup> and covers his face as would be appropriate for someone confronted with a vision of God,<sup>105</sup> Moses could have done these things out of precaution; given that the vision *could* be that of God, he was much safer complying than not. Moses' later demands for reassurances from God suggest the possibility that he was assessing for himself the legitimacy of the manifestation – an appropriate undertaking given the gravity of what Moses was being asked to do.<sup>106</sup>

By describing the recipient as initially doubtful about the authenticity of what he perceives, the author can trace out in detail the evidence establishing God's bona fides. The recipient's skepticism tends to stimulate a more intensive vetting than would be the case if the recipient were eager to credit the apparition. The recipient's own forensic investigation thus partially relieves others from the need to conduct as thorough an examination on their own. Equally important, the recipient's initially skeptical attitude lends credibility to his claim of having received a revelation: he shows himself as someone not overly eager to interpret ambiguous information as a mark that he is being favored by a divine visitation.

5. The credibility of the revelation is enhanced if it is not in the interest of the recipient. Someone whose report of a divine message creates a risk to his or her own welfare is more credible than someone who reports a message that is self-serving. In the law of ev-

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<sup>101</sup> *Id.* at 15:8 (New International Version).

<sup>102</sup> *Genesis* 15:9-17.

<sup>103</sup> *Exodus* 3:2-3.

<sup>104</sup> *Id.* at 3:5.

<sup>105</sup> *Id.* at 3:6.

<sup>106</sup> *Id.* at 3:11-14.

idence, an admission against interest is admissible even if it is hearsay, for the same reason: the person is considered to have been unlikely to make the statement if it were not true. Oracles against the recipient's interest are particularly delicious because they skewer someone the author dislikes. For example, Balaam's oracle is especially credible because the prophet there has been commissioned by a king who wishes evil on the Israelites.<sup>107</sup> The same could also be said for the prophets of the Northern Kingdom whose fulminations placed them at risk of retribution by kings who the author wishes to discredit.<sup>108</sup>

In other cases, a revelation may come from a disinterested party. Although this person's credibility may be lower than that of someone who has reason to fear retribution, it is still greater than the credibility of interested parties such as the 400 prophets on Ahab's payroll who dutifully report what the king wants to hear.<sup>109</sup> A king who wants impartial advice – or who wants to demonstrate to the public that he wants such advice, even if he does not – can resort to such a neutral party. Saul consults such a figure out of desperation when he cannot obtain any information from the usual sources such as the Urim or the prophets.<sup>110</sup> The text makes it clear that the witch of Endor is not one of Saul's retainers, and further validates her bona fides by reporting that Saul visits her in disguise and swears that she will not be punished.<sup>111</sup> Of course, consulting a disinterested party can be dangerous; the witch of Endor channels the figure of Samuel, who foretells Saul's utter defeat at the hands of the Philistines.<sup>112</sup>

The Judean king Josiah also seems to rely on a third party when he wishes to validate the "Book of the Law" found during the reconstruction of the temple.<sup>113</sup> He instructs his ministers to ask God what to do.<sup>114</sup> They consult the prophetess Huldah, who endorses the book and its contents.<sup>115</sup> Huldah's status as a female prophet, not otherwise mentioned in the Bible, suggests that she may have been an independent contractor who was consulted in order to provide an os-

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<sup>107</sup> *Numbers* 22:5-6.

<sup>108</sup> *1 Kings* 22:6-24.

<sup>109</sup> *Id.* at 3-6.

<sup>110</sup> *1 Samuel* 28:4-7.

<sup>111</sup> *Id.* at 8-10.

<sup>112</sup> *Id.* at 11-19.

<sup>113</sup> *2 Kings* 22:5-8.

<sup>114</sup> *Id.* at 11-13.

<sup>115</sup> *Id.* at 14-20.

tensibly neutral assessment (Huldah's impartiality is open to question, however; as the wife of the "keeper of the wardrobe" she was at least connected with the authorities, even if not on the payroll).<sup>116</sup>

6. Other tests of the validity of a revelation are whether the recommended action proves efficacious or whether the events being prophesied come to pass. Both of these tests are referenced in the Bible. This "proof in the pudding" approach is more complex than the others because it separates the knowledge conditions of the characters and the readers. The characters have no way of assessing the validity of the revelation because the events that would verify it have not yet come to pass. They must wait and see – a fact that places them in an uncomfortable position if, in the meantime, they must undertake risky actions in reliance on its veracity. This is the position that God initially proposes with respect to the revelation at the burning bush: Moses will receive confirmation as events transpire.<sup>117</sup> By resisting this idea, Moses suggests that the wait-and-see approach will place the people at too much risk, since they are asked to entrust their fortunes on faith alone; God responds by supplying Moses with miraculous signs to supplement the test of history.<sup>118</sup>

While the characters in the narrative lack the necessary information to assess the validity of prophesy by its results, the readers of the narrative are differently situated. They view history from the fifth dimension, as it were – situated outside of time and space – and therefore are able, like God, to know whether or not the revelation is validated by events. Exodus 3:12 is addressed to these readers: it asks them to consider the validity of Moses' commission in light of the later history of the Israelite people – their liberation from Egypt, receipt of the law on Mount Sinai, and settlement of the Promised Land as a free and independent nation. From this perspective, the commission to Moses appears entirely valid. Since the author's real concern is to convince his readers rather than the characters in the narrative, he sets forth the test of history as the most fundamental of all methods for assessing the validity of revelation.

At the same time, the author recognizes that even the test of history is not fully reliable. It screens out false prophecies that predict events that do not come to pass and it accepts the validity of

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<sup>116</sup> GEOFFREY P. MILLER, *THE WAYS OF A KING: LEGAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS IN THE BIBLE* 131 (2011); See PAULINE A. VIVIANO, Huldah, in *III ANCHOR BIBLE DICTIONARY* 321 (1992).

<sup>117</sup> *Exodus* 3:12.

<sup>118</sup> *Id.* at 4:2-7.

true prophecies which predict events that do occur. To this extent, it is effective. But it remains possible that a false prophet will accurately predict future events. So, while the test of history generates no false positives (no true prophets are rejected as false), it does generate false negatives (some false prophets can pass the test and be accepted as true). Particularly dangerous, in this respect, are prophecies that purport to be validated by signs and omens, because the events being assessed as probative are not linked to the fundamental message of the prophesy. A false prophet can make accurate predictions about signs and omens – thereby establishing his credibility – and then tie those predictions to a false message unrelated to the signs themselves. The book of Deuteronomy addresses this problem:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder,<sup>2</sup> and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,”<sup>3</sup> you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.<sup>4</sup><sup>119</sup>

7. One feature that may or may not be probative of the validity of a revelation is that of content. A content restriction can be an effective way of limiting the destabilizing potential of revelation by rejecting some claims of revelation *a fortiori* on the basis of what they say. On the other hand, content restrictions can be overly limiting because they cancel the creative potential that makes revelation a useful form of political authority in the first place. Thus, content restrictions would appear to be efficacious only to the extent that they exclude revelations that can be considered untrue in all circumstances.

The author uses content restrictions in exactly this way. Any revelation, even if validated by other means, is to be rejected if it counsels the Israelites to serve gods other than Yahweh.<sup>120</sup> On the

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<sup>119</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1-4 (New International Version).

<sup>120</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1-3, 18:18-22. The technique is similar to that employed by Augustine as a way to allow room for allegorical interpretation of the scriptures but limiting the scope of permissible interpretations to those that comport with fundamental Christian doctrine. ST. AUGUSTINE, ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, BOOK III § 15 (1958).

other hand, other claims of revelation are not to be rejected out of hand even if they appear outlandish or impossible. Some of the most important revelations in the Bible present situations where the information communicated by God is highly implausible: the announcement to Abraham, a wandering Aramean, that he will be the father of a great and powerful nation;<sup>121</sup> God's unexplained command to Abraham that he sacrifice his only child;<sup>122</sup> God's instruction to Moses to confront the Pharaoh even though Moses was wanted for murder and had no resources or standing to form a basis for political action.<sup>123</sup> The implication of these and other revelations is that the recipient should not automatically rely on the plausibility of the message when deciding whether what he hears is legitimate. In fact, a bit of the reverse may be true: because God intervenes in history only rarely and usually only when the intervention promises to make a difference, the recipient may have reason to believe that the very implausibility of what he hears is a reason to credit its veracity.

#### IV. ACCESS

In addition to the problems of divine inconstancy and false prophesy, a third destabilizing effect inherent in revelation is the fact that there are no intrinsic limitations on who may receive it. God can speak to anyone. In fact, the entire biblical narrative is premised on just such a divine action: God chooses Abraham out of all the peoples of the world without offering any clear reason for why Abraham and his descendants are so favored. The author, accordingly, cannot formally restrict the class of recipients of revelation. But if he does not restrict that class, he opens the door to potentially destabilizing revelations from unreliable sources.

This problem is dealt with through two strategies:

1. First, although God does speak to anyone he likes, his habit and preference is to appear to political leaders or heads of families: patriarchs, judges, important prophets, and to some of the kings of Israel. God's preference for political leaders is eminently sensible: if he wishes to make an impact on the community with a minimum of effort, he will work through existing structures of power and authority. God's habit in this respect is no different than the behavior of po-

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<sup>121</sup> *Genesis* 12:1-3.

<sup>122</sup> *Id.* at 22:1-2.

<sup>123</sup> *Exodus* 2:11-25.

litical leaders of today, who may sometimes advertise their ability to schmooze up the “man on the street,” but whose interactions in most cases are practically and realistically focused on the political elites. God’s favoritism for political leaders as recipients of revelation reduces the risk that commoners or dissidents will receive potentially destabilizing revelations (and, not coincidentally, also reduces the chances that anyone not from the political elite who claims to have received a revelation will be credited by others).

2. In the Sinai narrative, the author provides information about the recipients of that revelation which could act as a guide to assessing the credibility and authority of claims in other cases.<sup>124</sup> The information here is a bit confused, probably because competing groups enjoyed differing degrees of influence as the text evolved. The basic pattern is fairly clear, however. The author deals with three attributes of God’s presence: his voice, his location, and his physical body.<sup>125</sup> The author allocates these attributes according to carefully scripted rules.<sup>126</sup>

Moses is favored with the highest degree of revelation. He has unfettered access to God’s voice: God speaks to him repeatedly at Mount Sinai and responds when Moses calls for attention.<sup>127</sup> Moses also enjoys liberal access to God’s physical location. God summons him up the mountain on numerous occasions for consultations in the divine Oval Office. Moses gets to visit with God for longer periods than anyone else, including two stays of forty days and forty nights.<sup>128</sup> Moses also has unique access to God’s body. He participates in a covenant ceremony, along with Aaron and others, in which God displays at least part of his being.<sup>129</sup> After the idolatry of the golden calf, Moses demands to see God’s “glory.”<sup>130</sup> God agrees to show Moses his body, although not his face, because a “mortal man may see me and live.”<sup>131</sup> God wedges Moses in a crevice (probably to immobilize him and thus, like Ulysses and the Sirens, prevent him from giving in to the temptation to see more). God covers Moses

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<sup>124</sup> *Deuteronomy* 5:22-23.

<sup>125</sup> *Id.*

<sup>126</sup> *Id.*

<sup>127</sup> *Exodus* 19.

<sup>128</sup> *Id.* at 24:18, 34:28.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* at 24:9-10.

<sup>130</sup> *Id.* at 33:18-23.

<sup>131</sup> *Id.* at 33:20.



with his hand as he passes by and then allows him to see the divine backside on the way out.<sup>132</sup> Later, when Moses returns up the mountain with new blank tablets, God again passes in front of him (presumably shielding Moses from any sight of his face).<sup>133</sup> So favored is Moses by this last exchange that when he returns from the mountain his own face is shining – apparently manifesting some of the glory of God.<sup>134</sup> Moses enjoys one other privilege not afforded to anyone else: he gets to hear God himself pronounce the holy name.<sup>135</sup>

Aaron also has favor with God, although not as much as Moses. He does not speak directly to God on Sinai, although the book of Exodus reports several conversations involving Moses, Aaron and God during the contest with Pharaoh.<sup>136</sup> Aaron sometimes receives the privilege of going up the mountain,<sup>137</sup> although he is invited less frequently than his brother. When Aaron does ascend, he is allowed to approach God's presence, but not too close.<sup>138</sup> He along with seventy elders and Nadab and Abihu (otherwise-obscure figures described elsewhere as sons of Aaron), must stop at a distance while Moses alone goes forward.<sup>139</sup> In general, Aaron does not get to see God's body, but in the ceremony of covenant ratification he, the elders, Nadab and Abihu do see God, although perhaps only his feet on a pavement of blue sapphire.<sup>140</sup>

Joshua also has rights of access that rival, in some respects, those afforded to Aaron. Joshua gets to ascend the mountain with Moses to receive the tablets of the law, leaving Aaron and Hur (another obscure figure) behind to resolve disputes among the people.<sup>141</sup> The elders of Israel enjoy some degree of privileged access also.<sup>142</sup> God invites seventy of them to come part way up the mountain, and allows them and the other guests at the covenant ceremony to see some of his body.<sup>143</sup> The priests also enjoy rights of access to God,

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<sup>132</sup> *Exodus* 33:22-23.

<sup>133</sup> *Id.* at 34:6.

<sup>134</sup> *Id.* at 34:29-35.

<sup>135</sup> *Id.* at 33:19, 34:5, 3:15.

<sup>136</sup> *Id.* at 6:13-14, 7:7-9, 9:8, 12:1, 12:43.

<sup>137</sup> *Exodus* 19:24.

<sup>138</sup> *Id.* at 24:1.

<sup>139</sup> *Id.* at 24:1-2.

<sup>140</sup> *Id.* at 24:9-10.

<sup>141</sup> *See id.* at 24:14; *see also Exodus* 32:17.

<sup>142</sup> *Exodus* 24:9.

<sup>143</sup> *Id.* at 24:9-11.

but these are far more restricted than those granted to Aaron.<sup>144</sup> They are classed with the common people and kept behind barriers designed to hold back the masses from contact with the divine presence.<sup>145</sup>

As for the commoners, the author makes it clear that they are not to participate in the revelation except to a minimal degree. The people are generally denied the privilege of hearing God's voice. They receive the word of God through hearsay accounts from Moses or double hearsay from Aaron; if they are literate, they can read the words that God has inscribed on the tablets of the law. Faced with the conflicting goals of allowing the people to witness Moses speaking with God – in order to validate the authenticity of the revelation – while depriving them of the ability to comprehend the content of what God says, the author adopts a strategy similar to the one sometimes used in “true crime” television programs when a witness wishes to appear without being recognized. The strategy is to alter the voice of the interlocutor to make it unrecognizable. The biblical problem is different, of course: the author's purpose is not to disguise God's identity but rather to verify it while obscuring the content of what is said. This purpose is accomplished by allowing the people to understand what Moses is saying but making God's voice sound like peals of thunder.<sup>146</sup> In any event, the people have no reason to complain: they themselves ask not to hear God's voice out of fear that “if God speaks to us we shall die,” and plead with Moses to act as their intermediary.<sup>147</sup>

The author is also careful to delimit the peoples' rights of physical proximity. They are allowed to the foot of the mountain, a privilege that would be denied to non-Israelites, but they are otherwise generally refused any special rights of access.<sup>148</sup> God tells Moses to erect police barricades around the mountain to keep the common people out.<sup>149</sup> Anyone who touches an edge of the mountain will die.<sup>150</sup> Even with these precautions God is concerned that the people's demand to participate in the revelation will become unman-

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<sup>144</sup> *Id.* at 19:22-24.

<sup>145</sup> *Id.* at 19:24.

<sup>146</sup> *Id.* at 19:19.

<sup>147</sup> *Exodus* 20:19.

<sup>148</sup> *Id.* at 24:2.

<sup>149</sup> *Id.* at 19:12.

<sup>150</sup> *Id.* at 19:12-13.

ageable: he recalls Moses and tells him to warn the people not to attempt to break through the barriers.<sup>151</sup>

The people are also denied the right to see any part of God's body.<sup>152</sup> They must be kept far away from God for this reason: for them, any sight of God can mean instant death.<sup>153</sup> They observe the "glory" of God, but only from a distance like a "consuming fire on top of the mountain."<sup>154</sup> God organizes a carefully controlled showing in which the people are allowed to sightsee from the foot of the mountain after elaborate rituals of purification, but the people are terrified by the vision and in any event see only indirect manifestations such as lightning, fire, clouds, and smoke.<sup>155</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

This article has considered the Hebrew Bible's approach to revelation as a source of political authority. Accepting that God's will is valid and binding on human beings, the question becomes one of determining what God's will is. Because revelation is a wild card with the potential for disrupting institutional arrangements, the author identifies four means to control its effects: (a) the modality God uses to manifest his presence, which signals the importance of the revelation in question; (b) embedding, which restricts God's ability to change his mind; (c) authentication, which tests the validity of revelations; and (d) access rules, which privilege political elites as recipients of God's word.

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<sup>151</sup> *Id.* at 19:20-23.

<sup>152</sup> *Exodus* 19:24.

<sup>153</sup> *Id.* at 19:21.

<sup>154</sup> *Id.* at 24:17.

<sup>155</sup> *Id.* at 19:14-19.