Jewish Understandings of Revelation

Revelation, from the word “reveal,” refers to the traditional belief that three months after leaving slavery in Egypt, while the Israelites were assembled at the base of Mt. Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Torah from God.  God **revealed** the Torah to Moses who then brought it to the Israelites. (Precisely what was revealed directly to the Israelites, and directly to Moses, is a matter of conversation. I’ll discuss this later in this essay.) There is a detailed description of Revelation in the Torah, Exodus chapters 19 – 24. Here is a selection:

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top o the mountain and Moses went up. The Lord said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish. The priests also, who come near the Lord, must stay pure, lest the Lord break out against them.” But Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’” So the Lord said to him, “Go down, and come back together with Aaron but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them. And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

God spoke all these words, saying… (Exodus 19:16 – 20:1)

The passage quoted above continues with the first of two versions of the Ten Commandments (in Hebrew: eser dibrot, “ten utterances”) and is followed by many other laws.

Rabbi Norman Lamm (1927- ), a Modern Orthodox rabbi

I believe the Torah is divine revelation in two ways: in that it is God-given and in that it is godly. By ‘God-given,’ I mean that He willed that man abide by his commandments and that will was communicated in discrete words and letters. Man apprehends in many ways: by intuition, inspiration, experience, deduction and by direct instruction. The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal, and unambiguous a manner as possible, so that it will be understood by the largest number of the people to whom this will is addressed. Language, though so faulty an instrument, is still the best means of communication to most human beings. Hence, I accept unapologetically the idea of the verbal revelation of the Torah." (Rabbi Norman Lamm, *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, Macmillan, 1966.)

Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser (1907-1984), a Conservative rabbi, discussed the interplay in prophecy between the divine spirit and human reception and expression.

Man receives a divine communication when the divine spirit rests on him, but man must give form to that communication; He must express it in words, in images and in symbols which will make his message intelligible to other men. Out of this need to give form to the truth that is revealed to him, the prophet places the stamp of his own individuality upon that truth. He draws upon his own experience, upon the idiom current in his time; he creates images that will be familiar to his people. Thus the truth becomes personalized; it takes upon itself the robes of the world in which it is to enter to perform its work of moral and spiritual transformation. In the process of expression and transmission truth takes on a historical dimension, which the historian can examine by the tools of historical investigation, but all this in no way invalidates the role of the divine factor, the initial "breathing in" on the prophet of the message which is called to proclaim to the people of his time. (*Judaism: Profile of a Faith*, 1963, pp. 273-4.)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

As a report about Revelation, the Bible itself is a midrash. To convey what the prophets experienced, the Bible could either use terms of descriptions or terms of indication. Any description of the act of revelation in empirical categories would have produced a caricature. That is why all the Bible does is to state that revelation happened; how it happened is something they could only convey in words that are evocative and suggestive." (*God in Search of Man*, p.194.)

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, past-president of the Union for Reform Judaism, has written:

Torah is a compilation of both divine command and human response: It is a record of God talking to Jews and Jews talking to God. When I examine the writings of Torah, how then do I know what is divine revelation and what is human interpretation? As a mitzvah-inspired liberal Jew, the only option that I have is to decide for myself what binds me. I will seek guidance from rabbis and teachers, but ultimately I must examine each mitzvah and ask the question: Do I feel commanded in this instance as Moses was commanded? Here I rely on the words of Martin Buber: “I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me.” For the great majority of American Jews, there is no leader or institution with the authority to impose commandments; the autonomous individual decides for himself or herself." ("What Do American Jews Believe?" Commentary, August 1996.)