The Use of Non-Orthodox Scholarship in Orthodox Bible Learning

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Over the generations, Jewish commentators have interpreted the texts of Tanakh using traditional methods and sources. Many, however, also drew from non-traditional sources when they contributed positively to the discussion. For example, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra frequently employs Karaite scholarship. In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Rambam draws extensively from Aristotle and other philosophers. Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel frequently cites Christian commentaries and ancient histories. In the 19th century, rabbinic scholars such as Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) and Elijah Benamozegh in Italy; and Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel (Malbim) and David Zvi Hoffmann in Germany, benefited from more recent trends in archaeological and literary scholarly endeavors.

Many other rabbinic thinkers, however, have strenuously opposed the use of outside sources in explicating Tanakh. These rabbis did not want assumptions incompatible with Jewish tradition creeping into our religious worldview. This tension, i.e., whether or not to incorporate outside sources in Tanakh study, lies at

the heart of many of the great controversies within Jewish tradition. An important survey and analysis of various facets of this age-old debate can be found in the essays in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration*? (1997).

Since Jewish tradition places a premium on scholarship and intellectual honesty, we should stand willing to hear the truth from whoever says it. Rambam stated this axiom long ago in the introduction to his *Shemonah Perakim* commentary on *Avot*, and many of the greatest rabbinic figures before and after him have espoused this policy as well. One of the outstanding 20th century thinkers, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel), stressed that we must fear God, not intellectual challenge:

> The greatest deficiency in the quality of fear of God…is that fear of thought replaces fear of sin. When a person begins to be afraid of thinking, he goes and immerses himself in the morass of ignorance, which robs him of the light of soul, weakens his vigor, and casts a pall over his spirit (introduction to *Orot ha-Kodesh*, vol. 3, p. 26).

To implement these ideas in Bible scholarship, Rabbi Kook inspired his student Rabbi Moshe Seidel to embark on an ambitious project. Under Rabbi Seidel's leadership, a group of scholars convened in 1956 and carefully formulated the underlying principles for a new Orthodox commentary on the entire Bible. The first two volumes of the *Da'at Mikra* series were published by Mosad HaRav Kook in 1970, and its final volume was published in 2003. This exceptional series incorporates the gamut of traditional interpretation as well as contemporary research.

Literary tools, comparative linguistics, as well as the discovery of a wealth of ancient texts and artifacts have contributed immensely to our understanding the rich tapestry and complexity of biblical texts. Great traditional scholars of the previous generation such as Professor Nehama Leibowitz and Rabbi Mordechai Breuer; and contemporary scholars such as Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun, Shalom Carmy, and Elhanan Samet have benefited from contemporary literary and archaeological scholarship while working from the viewpoint of traditional Jewish learning.

Though we should be thrilled to gain a better sense of the biblical period as a result of contemporary scholarship, we must approach this endeavor with prudent caution as well. We first need to understand our own tradition—to have a grasp of our texts, assumptions, and the range of traditional interpretations. Additionally, everyone enters the fray with biases; non-Orthodox Jews or non-Jews bring beliefs and assumptions with them that often are incompatible with our tradition. We must carefully sift to distinguish between genuine evidence and underlying assumption.

This tension is expressed poignantly in an anecdote cited by R. Yosef ibn Aknin in his commentary to the Song of Songs (12th century). After noting the works of several rabbinic precedents for utilizing Christian and Muslim writings, he quotes a story related by Shemuel HaNagid:

R. Mazliah b. Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Shemuel HaNagid] when he came from Baghdad…that one day in [R. Hai Gaon's] yeshivah they studied the verse, "let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Psa. 141:5), and those present debated its meaning. R. Hai of blessed memory told R. Mazliah to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [R. Mazliah]. When [R. Hai] saw that R. Mazliah was upset, he rebuked him: "Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities—and even of shepherds, as is well known!"

Although R. Hai Gaon emerges victorious, the voice of R. Mazliah serves as a constant reminder that there is another side to this debate that must be weighed seriously. The religious pursuit of truth for the sake of Heaven is our highest goal in learning; but it must be a careful search for genuine truth, not a pursuit of the latest fads. In his *Faith and Doubt*, Dr. Norman Lamm has set the tone for this mode of inquiry:

Torah is a "Torah of truth," and to hide from the facts is to distort that truth into myth…It is this kind of position which honest men, particularly honest believers in God and Torah, must adopt at all times, and especially in our times. Conventional dogmas, even if endowed with the authority of an Aristotle—ancient or modern—must be tested vigorously. If they are found wanting, we need not bother with them. But if they are found to be substantially correct, we may not overlook them. We must then use newly discovered truths the better to

understand our Torah—the "Torah of truth."

For further study:
Rabbi Hayyim Angel, "From Black Fire to White Fire: Conversations about Religious Tanakh Learning Methodology" (2008), at www.jewishideas.org/node/50.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, "*Torat Hashem Temima:* The Contributions of Rav Yoel Bin-Nun to Religious Tanakh Study," *Tradition* 40:3 (Fall 2007), pp. 5-18.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, "Review of Rabbi Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavua*," in *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 21-33.

Rabbi Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1-38.

Prof. Barry L. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 81-100.

Prof. Marvin Fox, "Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation," in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 3-26.

Prof. Uriel Simon, "The Pursuit of Truth that is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah" (Hebrew), in *ha-Mikra va-Anahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in our Time, 1979), pp. 28-41.

Prof. Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation" (Hebrew), in *ha-Mikra va-Anahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in our Time, 1979), pp. 13-27.