Orthodox Bible-Study: The Reality on the Ground

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Orthodox Bible-Study: The Reality on the Ground[1]
B. Barry Levy

Much love, sanctity, and attention is lavished on the Bible in virtually all forms of Jewish religious life. Nevertheless, talmudic and midrashic considerations dominate the general picture of Judaism, particularly in the halakhic realm—and therefore in many details of Bible interpretation, application, and observance. To be sure, this dominance of the Bible by rabbinic concerns is not true of all Jews. Some early rabbis regularly kept the biblical and rabbinic corpora highly integrated. They often used the Bible as a check on the Talmud and related rabbinic thinking, noting that numerous biblical passages that putatively contained rabbinic ideas or derivations from Scripture were *asmakhta be-'alma*, "merely [scriptural] support." Furthermore, this argument was used by many of their later followers. Even so, in many late-antique, medieval, and post-medieval contexts, Talmud study outranked Bible study both quantitatively and qualitatively. Talmudic issues still determine or strongly influence many aspects of contemporary religious life, often known in scholarly circles as "Rabbinic Judaism." This situation derives in part from the early-rabbinic teaching that Moses received two *torot* on Sinai—one written in the Bible (which some ancient rabbis understood to be directed at all humanity[2]) and another oral one preserved by the rabbis and incorporated into the subsequently developed rabbinic literature (intended for the Jews).

A strong commitment to the importance of oral tradition in many ancient Near Eastern cultures—as evidenced by the preservation of very few written law codes but tens of thousands of legal documents, which of necessity bear witness to the oral transmission of numerous legal traditions in all

these societies—helped determine and reinforce the importance of this oral Torah for Jews long before the rabbis came on the scene. Even so, many early rabbinic leaders memorized all or much of the Bible, and although their citation of the Bible and reliance on its teachings are extremely widespread, they are not universal. Thus, preference for the rabbinic over the biblical was, and still remains, more a prioritizing of one than an outright rejection of the other. However, this uneasy balance sometimes was carried to excess. Today, traditional Jews who seemingly give the Bible too much attention are likely to be criticized if not ostracized by their rabbinic colleagues. Should they attempt to follow its values or laws independently of the normal rabbinic channels of interpretation and application, they may be decried as heretics or, in some cases, treated like Karaites.

This situation has contributed to either distancing many Jews from much of their Scripture or adopting it in rabbinic form; sometimes both. As a community, contemporary Jewish readers—young and old, traditionalist and non-traditionalist—often are deprived of a sophisticated appreciation of the Bible on its own terms, preferring instead to ignore it or to see it through rabbinic eyes. And many will grasp at any creative way to link the Bible to their lives, even when this does violence to its literal meaning or totally removes it from its ancient context. In like manner, many lack strong backgrounds in the non-rabbinic and contemporary scientific literatures that deal with Scripture, and often even the classical Jewish ones. This does not mean that all individual Jews are ignorant of the Bible or unaware of its classical and modern interpreters and interpretations. The weekly Torah reading and related educational and homiletical treatments have done much to keep the Bible's contents familiar to students and synagogue goers, and numerous people attend adult education classes that focus on parts of the Bible; indeed adult study of the books of the Torah has been a well-documented Jewish priority for more than 2,000 years. Individually and collectively, many Jews know or are familiar with much of the Torah, the Five Megillot, and many passages from the Prophets and Psalms. But partial awareness of some books appears quite positive in comparison with the almost unknown content of the Minor Prophets, Job, Proverbs, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. These books remain all but hidden from the Jewish public, and the knowledge of them that can be found tends to be anecdotal rather than systematic; it is oriented to late-antique or later rabbinic thinking rather than to an ancient and biblical mindset. And it rarely consists of more than isolated facts about specific verses or groups of them and random ways of looking at them.

Like the many artists who, over the past several millennia, depicted biblical characters as real or idealized images of themselves or their contemporaries rather than as authentic ancient realities, most modern readers imagine the people of the Bible thinking modern thoughts and conducting ancient life in ways that respond to modern questions and incorporate contemporary values, even if they are not dressed in fully modern garb or flying in airplanes. Some might even argue that the original texts were written in ways that intentionally accommodated endless centuries of evolving images and applications. Other readers perceive these ancient texts and people as specifically pre-modern and rabbinic. *Moshe Rabbenu* is a rabbinic title, not a biblical one, as is *Yosef ha-tzaddik*; Moses, David, and other biblical leaders often are described anachronistically in early rabbinic texts, holding rabbinic-type courts and conducting conversations more expected of rabbinic than biblical figures. Presentations of the Genesis characters (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their families) observing later Mosaic or even rabbinic religious practices, while not biblical in origin, are at least as early as Jubilees (usually dated in the second century b.c.e.) and were developed later in the Mishnah, Talmudim, Midrashim, and subsequent essays and commentaries.

Even so, numerous important rabbis rejected both the notion that Genesis 26:5—"…because Abraham obeyed my voice, observed my demands, my commands, my laws, and my dictates"—described that patriarch observing the 613 commandments and the rabbinic preference to interpret that book's narratives as if that is what they portrayed (see the related commentaries of Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak, the Tosafists, etc., and discussions of the Genesis characters as *Benei Noah*, "Noahides"[3]). Images of patriarchs as rabbis are sanctified by early and repeated midrashic use and remain the way many religious educators would have students understand the passages—but that preference makes such interpretations neither more believable nor binding. They are understandable because the ancients lacked modern historical perspective, and the texts served both educational and homiletical purposes. The latter reason remains operative even today, but we cannot ignore the potential role of historical

perspective in understanding this entire matter and its dominance in most modern considerations. Later presentations of Abraham, Moses, and Mordecai, for example, in fur hat and caftan and thinking hasidic thoughts may seem quaint and unhistorical, and they are seriously out of step with ancient realities. But perhaps more significant is their failure to acknowledge the distance they exhibit from other more realistic and no less faithful rabbinic interpretations. Even so, "realistic" is a highly subjective term that varies from one generation to another. And whatever one thinks of such presentations, methodologically they often differ little from contemporary treatments that fill the heads of scriptural heroes with equally anachronistic existential philosophy, modern science, or halakhic reasoning, or present them as Holocaust survivors or the purveyors of modern or postmodern cultural ideals such as democracy, ecology, or feminism. As far as I am concerned, an authentic reconstruction is one that is realistic to the original context of the story, and since our knowledge of that context is necessarily imperfect, varies with the interpreter, and constantly is modified in the light of new discoveries, we must understand its reconstruction as incomplete and impermanent. However, this should not give free reign to the manifold creative suggestions that have accumulated over the centuries.

The range of passages included in my generalization about Jewish knowledge of the Bible and the overall validity of its claim depend on the educational experiences afforded to various individuals, the extent to which they remember what they were taught about the Bible (usually) in high school, and whether they continued to study it after graduating, but I believe the statement does describe the Jewish reality in today's Western world. Those who have been raised and educated outside the Jewish contexts in which these things may have been taken seriously and have foregone the opportunity to study them elsewhere usually will have at their disposal only what is available from the general non-Jewish culture, which once was substantial, at least regarding the Bible, but now is negligible. It seems that one of the last taboos in contemporary American culture is teaching the Bible without preaching it. Students who seek to buck this trend by developing an accurate understanding of the big picture that includes these facts, texts, and interpretations, as well as the intellectual climates that they represent now and that they reflected over the ages (of which the aforementioned details allude to only small parts), usually are left to do so through personal exploration. Both they and the adults who succeed in grasping this broad reality are a small, atypical minority. Rabbis, scholars, well-educated students, and a few highly interested laypeople may achieve a more sophisticated and historically accurate understanding of all this, but the general Jewish population has not received adequate exposure to two worlds of valuable information about the Bible, one in the rabbinic commentaries and other books and the other outside them, and usually their study is expressed in inversely proportional measures. Nor do most Jews appreciate the contextual realities of the Bible or how its books represent the historical and intellectual worlds in which they were produced; the same problem exists for their interpreters. Usually these texts are taught because of their implications for contemporary ideologies and observances, which may be responding to different post-biblical and even non-rabbinic concerns and pressures. And yet, according to many pious Jewish understandings, contextual influences on the Torah and its interpreters never existed, indeed could not exist and cannot, even now, and such non-traditional explanations (which is not to say anti-traditional ones, though often they are equated) should be ignored. According to such thinking these interpretations are unnecessary and misleading, work counter to spiritual treatment of Scripture, and have no place in religious education of any sort. Ancient elements that were supposedly misconstrued in this way presumably did not contribute to the content or direction of any biblical passage, commentary, or edition, and therefore such thinking should be ignored, disavowed, or discredited wherever it is alleged to appear. In short, for such readers, it is preferable to de-contextualize the Bible, to see it outside and above the world at large; for most others, the more the Bible, its characters, and its events can be linked to contemporary ancient ones, the more credible it is. According to the first group, verses such as Leviticus 18:1–2, which prohibit the practices of the ancient Egyptians, whose land the Hebrews left, and those of the Canaanites, into whose land they were going, seemingly were really about the Romans, Greeks, and other post-biblical nations. Contrast the editorial statements in some rabbinic Bibles (e.g., Warsaw, 1860) to the effect that all internal references to nations were to ancient peoples and their practices, not contemporary ones, statements seemingly intended to deflect possibly negative statements about nineteenth-century

European powers, not an acceptance of the relevance of ancient Canaanites and Egyptians.

Despite the enormous differences among individual rabbinic commentators that allow for such variations in contextualizing Bible interpretations, this analysis suggests two possibilities. According to the first, either rabbinic Bible interpretation must be totally different from and remarkably superior to all other types of scriptural analysis and the very best if not the only way to understand it, or Jewish intellectual history must be nothing more than a pale shadow of whatever the rest of humanity was thinking at any given time and not worthy of the emulation many pious people imagine it to deserve. The first attitude regularly is taught or assumed by a major segment of the Orthodox Jewish community; the second is often expressed by those who know little about the history of Jewish thought. Both opinions are exaggerated and less than helpful.

In fact, Jewish understanding of Scripture is a function of both the rabbinic tradition and the broad treatment of the Bible in the constantly changing contexts inhabited by its interpreters. The rabbinic interpretation of Scripture, though not equivalent to all other thinking about it, is not, for that reason, lacking in brilliance, creativity, or originality. Indeed, evidence of these qualities is present almost everywhere, while greater awareness of these external influences can be gleaned from the background noise in the many rabbinic books treated above than regularly is acknowledged. But the fact that few traditionalist religious leaders now seem engaged by it confirms that it played little if any role in their training and therefore even less in that of their students.[4] A careful comparison of various Jewish intellectual experiences with the corresponding (non-Jewish) Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Italian, German, French, Turkish, Russian, British, and American ones, for example, demonstrates that Jews neither ignored these cultures nor mimicked them and their reactions to the Bible, though they learned much from them and rejected some of their treatments. Often they made original contributions to composing or to understanding the primary documents of these cultures and to synthesizing them with extant Jewish ones, much as biblical writers did with the societies in or against which they wrote. Thus Christian and Muslim contributions to rabbinic Bible study were extensive—particularly in the areas of grammar, history, philosophy, and science—though often they were secondary and ignored by Jews. Many of Abarbanel's commentaries, for example, are prefaced by short biographical sketches that relate directly to his professional experiences and insure links between his commentaries and late-medieval historical reality.

Even today, one finds social and educational contexts in which some secular Jews and other Orthodox ones are actively directed away from Bible study for fear of being affected negatively by its contents, its messages, and the dynamics related to its engagement. These groups intend different things by such intellectual recoiling, but the effects are largely similar. This attitude may owe a debt to the challenges inherent in modern critical scholarship and the pious responses to it, which work like a magnet, repelling some groups even as they attract others, but surely this avoidance of the Bible is not solely the result of contemporary considerations. In one form or another, it has been a part of Jewish thinking for most of the past two millennia, and that includes the teachings of some unquestionable rabbinic authorities who warned their followers to distance their sons from concentrated Bible study.[5] Presumably such individuals utilized the Babylonian Talmud as a substitute for Scripture, while modern de-biblicized secularists seemingly have none at all, at least no Jewish one. Its absence from their educational platforms likely may lead to assimilation and, if not for the presence of certain Jewish cultural affinities, their total disappearance as Jews.

Many who take their scriptural legacy seriously feel that both these Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups, though motivated by very different considerations, should examine—nay, study—their shared scriptural legacy. Such activity could benefit from their intellectual contributions and enrich both groups of participants personally, at least in order to better understand themselves, if not the Bible and its interpretation. But for this to happen these individuals must trust others outside their immediate cultural orbits, experiment with new ideas, and explore a few that initially may be uncomfortable, including some that eventually will be rejected. Such daring is unusual today (one noted exception is the advanced Bible study in certain Israeli *yeshivot*), and I find it more prevalent among students than teachers and educational leaders, many of whom actively discourage it, but it is akin to what many medieval writers did, and there are signs that it may be on the cusp of a revival, especially in a few Israeli *yeshivot*.

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Educators and rabbis use the Bible to teach Judaism as they understand it, usually following their convictions about how to live according to it. Often they see no reason to dwell on obscure details of cartography, agriculture, history, or even religion, and they seem equally disinterested in the analogous issues in both the commentaries and the other books that discuss them, unless they are important for teaching Judaism today. This reality is understandable but disappointing, because it does little to acknowledge that knowing the Bible and teaching it have independent value beyond what can be preached from it and that such a policy of careful selection and control of the issues that emerge from Bible study has done little and in the future will do even less to change the description with which this essay began.

Effective Jewish education needs to be constructed around inspiring religious experiences, but it also must involve extensive study of texts, in some cases their memorization. The Bible is one of the major textual subjects covered in elementary schools, where the Torah receives the lion's share of attention. High school curricula often consider it less important, and where students are segregated by sex, males often receive far fewer Bible classes than females (Talmud usually accounts for the imbalance). Even so, high schools often include parts of the Prophets, Psalms, Megillot, and other books in their curricula. The Historical Prophets may be read seriatim (often primarily as language exercises), or studied in the light of some rabbinic comments. Books that lack strong connections to the liturgy are downplayed, but scriptural readings also are associated with holy days and, throughout the year, many occasions are linked to the passages that deal with them: Esther, Jonah, Lamentations, Psalms, and parts of the Torah and Prophets are particularly important in this way. Bible study also includes *Parashat Ha-Shavua'*.

Undoubtedly the most commonly heard response to my university classes for more than 40 years has been the comment I (and probably many other professors) receive at the beginning of every semester: "This class was interesting and made sense, but I had 10 [or more] years of day school education before I arrived here. Why didn't anyone tell me these things before?" In fact, students often are left with immature and sometimes misinformed notions about some of what they have studied, and they rapidly fall victim to alternative, more academic and more critical-sounding, sometimes non-Jewish, anti-Semitic, or anti-Zionist ideas that circulate in the university and the adult world. How many students think that the rabbinic tradition necessitates fidelity to the notions that the ancient Israelites built the pyramids; that the text of the entire Torah was brought down by Moses from Mt. Sinai; that Abraham observed the entire Torah; that the Torah text is letter perfect; that midrashic interpretations always contain the literal meaning of the Torah; that Mordecai was Esther's uncle; and so forth? What upsets me is not that Judaism lacks sophisticated responses to such matters, but that that many students are not adequately exposed to them, often because teachers have not been, or they are fearful of dealing with them. One way or another, Christian students outgrow their belief in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy; *mutatis mutandis*, Jewish ones must do likewise.

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If today's realities differ from those that influenced the production of these books and the commentaries they contain, often by many centuries, can they serve the interests and needs of contemporary students of the material? Or must one require the replacement of such teachings with less reasonable and less defensible ones, solely because they are old or demand more commitment? Should educators require the production of new collections of sources that both anchor today's readers in the tradition and move them forward? Are they being created, and are teachers, much less students, regularly taught to use them? And do they actually advance the process or merely circle back through some elements of the tradition in an attempt to limit what is being excerpted for use and, above all else, to avoid exhibiting any contemporary influence? Moreover, what should we say about critical thinking,

the hallmark of numerous Rishonim and Aharonim alike (which is very different from the modern concept of "biblical criticism") and its relevance to all of the above? Should names like Joseph Soloveitchik, Nehama Leibowitz, and Jonathan Sacks fill Bible classes alongside Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban—sometimes instead of them? And are we willing to allow the discussions of the Bible to be driven by the issues and methods of Moshe Shamah and Mordechai Breuer?

My brief response to all this is to encourage studying the Bible and the history of the interpretation of its passages, which necessitates that students understand how different answers to a question were legitimate suggestions in different contexts and, where possible, why they differed. This approach requires choosing and studying texts for the questions raised, a range of the solutions different authors offered, and how both reflected the thinking of their times. It does not necessitate studying the entire text or recapitulating all of Jewish intellectual history before exploring modern alternatives; and it does not necessitate believing in the binding nature of all the answers. Most of the time, it does not matter particularly if students study old commentaries or new ones, as long as they learn the languages in which they were written, master the texts, and are exposed to the best available interpretations. If the best are from early medieval times, teachers owe an intellectual debt to their authors to use them and to demonstrate their importance, historical priority, and longevity. If the best are later or even contemporary, teachers should use them and stress the continuity of the interpretative process and the validity of modern contributions to it. Whether this means they must study Rishonim, Aharonim or scientific writings, they must deal with additional questions that may arise. Because few writers ever define what actually is "best," that too is an essential part of the quest for understanding.

Misrepresentations of the classical interpreters and their methods, coupled with fear of innovation and heresy and the inability to decide how to use properly either the ancient traditional materials, the sophisticated medieval rabbinic responses, or their contemporary analogues, reinforce the postmodern obsession with the "slippery slope," perhaps the most overly used argument in the contemporary traditionalist's ideological arsenal. Essentially, this line of reasoning consigns to oblivion any notion that seems in potential conflict with any pious assumption, however unnecessary, inauthentic, misguided, or subject to rabbinic debate, because it might anticipate a challenge or problem. Sometimes it even leads to censoring presumptively offensive texts that express such notions, particularly during translation. Concomitantly, it prioritizes those assumptions of which it approves and interprets the Bible in accord with them. Unfortunately, educators often accept this battery of errors, as when they share, actively or passively, in a conspiracy of silence that avoids dealing with what they imagine to be potentially troubling, Bible-related issues. What I find amazing is that they sometimes respond this way, even when these ideas have been discussed openly by the rabbis for a millennium or two, have been anticipated by students' questions, and remain compelling contemporary concerns. This leaves people with the impression that the rabbinic tradition is only a warm, fuzzy, homiletical mist that cannot cope with many of these classic if potentially challenging subjects, which it now enshrouds in a cloud of irrelevance, illegitimacy, and suspicion.

Nothing could be farther from the actual way the rabbinic tradition worked or works, in at least some *yeshivot* even today, but often teachers postpone such considerations to some advanced level of education that many who need them immediately will never experience. Even when both classic and modern treatments of a text or notion share the same data and approaches, often the teachers never let them get close enough to each other to appear in lockstep, because they themselves may not recognize these links, or because they prefer to ignore them for fear of validating "modern" study and thereby purportedly leading students astray. But if admitting the existence of a problem can cause massive defection by students or teachers—and I neither deny that possibility nor minimize its significance—something must be radically wrong, not only with the way it and similar problems have been handled but with much of the educational process that has been employed up to that point. Commitments properly instilled cannot be that shallow or that easily overturned; and, despite a widespread consensus to the contrary, admitting the existence of real challenges to accepted truths or assumptions often strengthens commitment more than it undermines it.

When students finally do learn about these links, and some eventually will (unless they are actively isolated from Western society and its institutions of advanced learning, or at least from the study of the Humanities, or from most good *yeshivot*), this lack of prior exposure, preparation, and legitimization

can be devastating to their spiritual health, either because it forces them to ignore the thinking world around them—indeed, to disengage from it—or it allows that world to absorb them, as it forces itself upon them and its appeals become irresistible. Instead of educating students satisfactorily by teaching them the full range of traditional responses and how to negotiate these sometimes thorny issues, religious leaders often encourage their systematic avoidance and shelter students indefinitely. But just as isolation from various stimuli often interferes with the development of the body's immune system, too much distance from these issues—even though they often have well-developed roots in the rabbinic tradition itself and important places in the thinking and writing of well-known sages—can leave students vulnerable to doubts and religious crises when they do learn about them.

For students who are willing to take on some or all of this academic work in conjunction with a spiritual quest, I would add one more point.

In the final analysis, and preferably *ab initio*, every student who sees the Bible as part of a personal spiritual quest—who seeks to determine what the text means, not merely what it says—must enter the lists as an individual combatant in its ongoing, indeed, never?ending study. The ultimate question of any engaged reader is "What does this text mean to me?" and finding the answer is a complicated process. Whether as shield?bearer for a talmudic rabbi, squire to a medieval interpretative knight, computer operator for a space age textual scientist, or all three, the spiritually motivated Jewish student of Scripture cannot avoid the need to make discriminating, learned decisions about how to understand and apply to his or her personal life the many differing approaches to the Bible that have been enriched by both traditional and modern writers. The task is arduous, and, despite the intellectual and spiritual pleasures that accrue to the participant, uncertainty discourages many from enlisting.

Before ancient Israelite warriors went to battle, a priest addressed them (*cf.* Deut. 20:2–10). He released some, including the fearful, from participating, encouraged others in pursuit of the objective, and ensured adherence to religious standards during the operations. Dreams of success, honor, and riches may have added additional personal incentives, but the Bible did not prioritize them. Encouragement, directions, and warnings, obviously are valuable to modern combatants in the struggle to understand the Bible, but few spoils are available to attract them, while many challenges and distractions, not to mention financial benefits for those who decline this opportunity, often loom large. Despite all the supposed support for the Bible and its study, global Jewish failure to prioritize this aspect of religious and cultural learning makes conscription of the talented and the worthy a national priority.

Were a summons to this intellectual and spiritual battle possible, and were one to offer the participants an exhortatory address in the spirit of the ancient priest who did likewise in anticipation of military engagements, one could not provide a better model than that expressed in the Bible's beautiful tribute to the Torah associated with ancient Israel's greatest warrior, David:

> The teachings of Your mouth are dearer to me
> than thousands of gold and silver pieces...
> I rejoice over Your words
> like one who has found much booty (Ps. 119:72, 162).

But perhaps this can be realized most fully through application of the initiatory message God reportedly gave another great military leader, Joshua:

Do not allow this book of the Torah to be absent from your mouth; study it day and night in order that you be able to conduct yourself according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your path successful and be wise (Josh. 1:8).

Notes

[1] This article contains sections from a much larger essay soon to be published by Urim. Thanks to Rabbi Hayyim Angel for selecting those sections he felt most appropriate for this volume. It is offered in memory of my recently departed dear friend, Joel Linsider, former judge in Albany, NY and *‘oleh* to Jerusalem, whose greatest pleasures were to fulfill the words of the prayer *Ahavah Rabbah: le-havin u-le-haskil, li-shmo‘a, li-lemod u-le-lammed, li-shemor, ve-la-‘asot, u-le-kayyem.*

[2] See the sources and discussions in Menahem (Marc) Hirshman, *Torah le-Khol Ba’ei Olam: Zerem Universali be-Sifrut ha-Tannaim ve-Yahaso le-Hokhmat ha-Amim* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uhad, 1999).

[3] *E.g.*, Meir Dan Plotzki, *Keli Hemdah*, Vol. 1–3 (Piotrkow, 1927; reprint, Brooklyn, 1986); and Barukh Rakovsky, *Birkat Avot* (Jerusalem, 1990).

[4] Note the online uproar generated in October, 2010, by Artscroll’s omission of Zalman Sorotzkin’s harmless reference to *Robinson Crusoe* from the translation of his five-volume, Hebrew Torah commentary, *Oznayim la-Torah.* Sorotzkin (1881–1966) was and remains above all suspicion of being a modern radical; the omission typifies others by Artscroll editors and translators during the past several decades.

[5] Frank Ephraim Talmage, “Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality,” *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Studies in Medieval Jewish Exegesis and Polemics*, edited by Barry Dov Walfish (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991) pp. 151–171.