The Yeshiva and the Academy

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The study of *Tanakh* is an awesome undertaking, given its infinite depth. This article will explore the approaches of the yeshiva and the academy to *Tanakh* study. We will define the yeshiva broadly to include any traditional religious Jewish setting, be it the synagogue, study hall, adult education class, seminary, or personal study. In contrast, the academy is any ostensibly neutral scholarly setting, primarily universities and colleges, which officially is not committed to a particular set of religious beliefs.

In theory, the text analysis in the yeshiva and the academy could be identical, since both engage in the quest for truth. The fundamental difference between the two is that in the yeshiva, we study *Tanakh* as a means to understanding revelation as the expression of God's will. The scholarly conclusions we reach impact directly on our lives and our religious worldview. In the academy, on the other hand, truth is pursued as an intellectual activity for its own sake, usually as an end in itself.

Over the generations, Jewish commentators have interpreted the texts of *Tanakh* using traditional methods and sources. Many also drew from non-traditional sources. To illustrate, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (twelfth-century Spain, Italy) frequently cited Karaite scholarship even though he was engaged in an ongoing polemic against Karaism. Rambam (twelfth-century Spain, Egypt) drew extensively from Aristotle and other thinkers in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (fifteenth-century Spain, Italy) frequently cites Christian commentaries and ancient histories. In the nineteenth 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 significantly from academic endeavors.

Many other rabbis, however, have opposed the use of outside sources in explicating *Tanakh*.[2] These rabbis did not want assumptions incompatible with Jewish tradition creeping into our religious worldview. This tension about whether or not to incorporate outside wisdom into *Tanakh* study lies at the heart of many of the great controversies in the history of Jewish tradition.

II

In analyzing the respective advantages and shortcomings of the approaches of the yeshiva and the academy, it is appropriate to pinpoint the biases of each. The yeshiva community studies each word of *Tanakh* with passionate commitment to God and humanity, and with a deep awe and reverence of tradition. These are biases (albeit noble ones) that will affect our scholarship, and it is vital to acknowledge them. Less favorably, it is possible for chauvinism to enter religious thought, with an insistence that only we have the truth. Our belief in the divine revelation of *Tanakh* should make us recognize that no one person, or group of people, can fully fathom its infinite glory and depth. Finally, our commitment to *Tanakh* and tradition often makes it more difficult to change our assumptions with the availability of new information than if we were detached and studying in a neutral setting. Thus, academic biblical scholarship gains on the one hand by its ostensible neutrality. It may be able to see things that one in love with tradition cannot.

However, those professing neutrality may not always acknowledge that they, too, are biased. There is no such thing as purely objective, or infallible, human thought. For example, Julius Wellhausen, a liberal Protestant scholar of late-nineteenth-century Germany, is often considered the most important architect of the so-called Documentary Hypothesis. Building on earlier nineteenth-century scholarship, he asserted that different sections of the Torah were composed over several centuries, long after the time of Moses. He argued that some of the narratives comprise the earliest layers of the Torah. Then came the classical prophets, and only then were most of the legal sections of the Torah added. These strands were redacted by later scholars, he believed, into the Torah as we know it today.

Although many were quick to accept this hypothesis, Professor Jon D. Levenson (Harvard University) has demonstrated that it is an expression of liberal Protestant theology that goes far beyond the textual evidence. By arguing that later scholars and priests added the Torah's laws, Wellhausen and his followers were suggesting that those later writers distorted the original religion of the prophets and patriarchs. According to Wellhausen, then, the Torah's laws were a later—and dispensable—aspect of true Israelite religion. Instead of Paul's related accusations against the Pharisees, these liberal Protestant German scholars dissected and reinterpreted the Torah itself in accordance with their own beliefs.[3]

The foregoing criticism does not invalidate all of the questions and conclusions suggested by that school of thought. Many of their observations have proven helpful in later biblical scholarship. We need to recognize, however, that the suggestions of Wellhausen's school reflect powerful underlying biases—some of which go far beyond the textual evidence.[4]

The traditional Jewish starting point is rather different: God revealed the Torah to Moses and Israel as an unparalleled and revolutionary vision for Israel and for all of humanity. Its laws and narratives mesh as integral components of a sophisticated, exalted, unified program for life. The later prophets came to uphold and encourage faithfulness to God and the Torah.

In *Tanakh*, people who live by the Torah's standards are praiseworthy, and people who violate them are culpable. So, for example, the Book of Samuel extols David for his exceptional faith in battling Goliath, and then mercilessly condemns him for the Bathsheba affair. This viewpoint reflects the singular philosophy of *Tanakh*—profoundly honest evaluation of people based on their actions. It would be specious to argue that the first half of the narrative was written by someone who supported

David, whereas the latter account was authored by someone who hated David. Rather, the entire narrative was written by prophets who loved God and who demanded that even the greatest and most beloved of our leaders be faithful to the Torah.

Of course, truth is infinitely complex and is presented in multiple facets in *Tanakh*. Additionally, our understanding is necessarily subject to the limitations of human interpretation. Nevertheless, the text remains the standard against which we evaluate all opinions. Religious scholarship admits (or is supposed to admit!) its shortcomings and biases while relentlessly trying to fathom the revealed word of God.

III

The ideal learning framework espouses traditional beliefs and studies as a means to a religious end, and defines issues carefully, while striving for intellectual openness and honesty. Reaching this synthesis is difficult, since it requires passionate commitment alongside an effort to be detached while learning in order to refine knowledge and understanding. When extolling two of his great rabbinic heroes—Rabbis Joseph Soloveitchik and Benzion Uziel—Rabbi Marc D. Angel quotes the Jerusalem Talmud, which states that the path of Torah has fire to its right and ice to its left. Followers of the Torah must attempt to walk precisely in the middle (J.T. *Hagigah* 2:1, 77a).[5]

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. The groundbreaking work of twentieth-century scholars such as Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto, Yehudah Elitzur, Yehoshua Meir Grintz, Yehezkel Kaufmann, and Nahum Sarna has enhanced our understanding of the biblical world by combining a mastery of *Tanakh* with a thorough understanding of the ancient Near Eastern texts unearthed during the previous two centuries.

At the same time, it must be recognized that our knowledge of the ancient world is limited. We have uncovered but a small fraction of the artifacts and literature of the ancient Near Eastern world, and much of what we have discovered is subject to multiple interpretations. We should be thrilled to gain a better sense of the biblical period, but must approach the evidence with prudent caution as well.[6]

To benefit from contemporary biblical scholarship properly, we first must understand our own tradition—to have a grasp of our texts, assumptions, and the range of traditional interpretations. This educational process points to a much larger issue. For example, studying comparative religion should be broadening. However, people unfamiliar with their own tradition, or who know it primarily from non-traditional teachers or textbooks, will have little more than a shallow basis for comparison.

Religious scholarship benefits from contemporary findings—both information and methodology. Outside perspectives prod us to be more critical in our own learning. On the other side of the equation, the academy stands to benefit from those who are heirs to thousands of years of tradition, who approach every word of *Tanakh* with awe and reverence, and who care deeply about the intricate relationship between texts.[7] The academy also must become more aware of its own underlying biases.

IV

Ultimately, we must recognize the strengths and weaknesses in the approaches of the yeshiva and the academy. By doing so, we can study the eternal words of *Tanakh* using the best of classical and contemporary scholarship. This process gives us an ever-refining ability to deepen our relationship with God, the world community, and ourselves.

Dr. Norman Lamm has set the tone for this 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."[8]

Our early morning daily liturgy challenges us: "Ever shall a person be God-fearing in secret as in public, with truth in his heart as on his lips." May we be worthy of pursuing that noble combination.

[1] This essay appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 19–29.

[2] See, for example, the essays in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* ed. J. J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997). See also the survey of opinions in Yehudah Levi, *Torah Study: A Survey of Classic Sources on Timely Issues* (New York: Feldheim, 1990), pp. 257–274. This survey includes traditional approaches regarding exposure to sciences, humanities, and other disciplines.

[3] Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1–32. See also Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985, paperback edition), pp. 1–4, where he shows how many prominent Christian Bible scholars after Wellhausen continued with these Pauline doctrinal biases in the name of "objective" scholarship.

[4] For a thorough discussion of the Documentary Hypothesis, critiques of that theory, and traditional responses to the genuine scholarly issues involved, see R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: *Yediot Aharonot*, 2013), pp. 21–150.

[5] Introduction to *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Marc D. Angel (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), p. xvi; *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), pp. 69–70.

[6] For a discussion of the broader implications of this issue and analysis of some of the major ostensible conflicts between the biblical text and archaeological evidence, see R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh*, pp. 247–346.

[7] Cf. the observation of William H. C. Propp: “Generations of Bible students are taught that the goal of criticism is to find contradiction as a first not a last resort, and to attribute every verse, nay every word, to an author or editor. That is what we do for a living. But the folly of harmonizing away every contradiction, every duplication, is less than the folly of chopping the text into dozens of particles or redactional levels. After all, the *harmonizing* reader may at least recreate the editors’ understanding of their product. But the *atomizing* reader posits and analyzes literary materials whose existence is highly questionable” (*Anchor Bible 2A: Exodus 19–40* [New York: Doubleday, 2006], p. 734). At the conclusion of his commentary, Propp explains that he often consulted medieval rabbinic commentators precisely because they saw unity in the composite whole of the Torah (p. 808). See also Michael V. Fox: “Medieval Jewish commentary has largely been neglected in academic Bible scholarship, though a great many of the ideas of modern commentators arose first among the medieval, and many of their brightest insights are absent from later exegesis” (*Anchor Bible 18A: Proverbs 1–9* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], p. 12).

[8] R. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York: Ktav, 1971), pp. 124–125. See also R. Shalom Carmy, “To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir’at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7–24.