Traditional and Academic Tanakh Study: Opportunities and Challenges

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Tanakh lies at the heart and soul of Judaism. The Talmud and Midrash, Jewish philosophy and mysticism, and Jewish thought all find their deepest roots in the Bible. For millennia, Jews and other faith communities have been transformed by this unparalleled collection of 24 books. Tanakh is accessible and enjoyable to small children and to the most sophisticated scholars and thinkers. It is a singular privilege to encounter its sacred words, to engage with its eternal messages, and to be galvanized to greater ethical and social action and spiritual growth as a result of our study.[1]

From the perspective of contemporary religious students of Tanakh, we have remarkable opportunities today. Scholars publish critical editions of our classical commentators so that we have access to the most accurate texts from our greatest teachers. Scholars discover and publish previously obscure rabbinic works, enabling us to broaden our understanding of the range of interpretation in the classical period. They also advance the field of biblical study in areas including, but not limited to, literary analysis, archaeology and history, and linguistics. The information readily available in books, online resources, and classes is breathtaking.

At the same time, however, these opportunities also pose serious challenges to our enterprise. How do we balance this flood of knowledge and

methodology with the fact that many scholars in the field are not Orthodox Jews and therefore bring their own assumptions and biases to their work? Are there means for sorting through which information and methodology is beneficial for our religious growth and which must be discarded or modified? Ultimately, the litmus test of success for our study of Tanakh is that it deepens our religious commitments and inspires us to greater ethical behavior. How do we shape the contours of this discussion to maximize those benefits and characterize that process with intellectual honesty and integrity?

When we learn and teach Tanakh properly, we convey a sense of holiness and reverence, coupled with respect for individuality and intellectual struggle with our most sacred texts and traditions. Tanakh has the singular ability to inspire and edify people of all ages and backgrounds. The potent combination of rabbinic commentary and contemporary scholarship enables our minds, hearts, and souls to complement one another in a holistic spiritual and intellectual experience. The maturation of sophisticated Tanakh study provides us with a system with which to navigate the complicated contours of scholarship and religious growth. Rabbis and educators have the immense responsibility to sort through available information, commentaries, and methodologies in order to steer the discussion for the benefit of the community.

In theory, the text analysis in the yeshivah and the academy could be identical, since both engage in the quest for truth. The fundamental difference between the two is that in the yeshivah, 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. There also are no accompanying beliefs in the revelation of the text.

The ostensible conflicts between traditional and academic scholarship have led some scholars, including several who identify with the Orthodox community, to conclude that traditional faith is incompatible with scholarship. This supposition has led some to reject traditional belief outright, or to radically redefine faith to make it compatible with their scholarly conclusions, or to radically reinterpret classical sources in an attempt to justify such paradigm shifts as being within tradition. These positions have led to counter-reactions in some Orthodox circles that adopt excessively dogmatic and restrictive positions to prohibit scholarly inquiry or *peshat* learning altogether. Both sides may be motivated by a profound and authentic religious desire to connect to God and the Torah, but they distort aspects of tradition and create dangerous and unnecessary rifts between us.
In *Ad HaYom HaZeh*, Rabbi Amnon Bazak, one of the bright stars at Yeshivat Har Etzion and its affiliated Herzog College, offers a sophisticated understanding of Tanakh and our faith axioms while simultaneously being fully open to contemporary scholarship. Addressing the fact that many in the Orthodox world disregard contemporary academic scholarship, Rabbi Bazak offers three reasons why such willful ignorance is inexcusable: (1) On educational grounds these issues are widely publicized, and therefore rabbis and religious educators must be able to address them intelligently. (2) Many of the

questions are genuine, and must be taken seriously on scholarly grounds. (3) We often gain a better understanding of Tanakh with the aid of contemporary scholarship.

Rabbi Bazak's central premise is that we must distinguish between facts and compelling tools of analysis, which must be considered in our learning; and the assumptions of scholars, which we reject when they conflict with traditional beliefs. Rabbi Bazak argues that nothing based on facts forces one to choose between faith and scholarship.[2]

The growing popularity of what Rabbi Shalom Carmy calls the "literary-theological" approach to Tanakh study has been transforming the way we approach our most sacred texts. This methodology demands a finely tuned text reading, along with a focus on the religious significance of the passage. The premises of this approach include: (1) Oral Law and classical commentaries are central to the way we understand the revealed word of God, and (2) it is vital to study biblical passages in their literary and historical context.[3]

Over the past two centuries, analysis of literary tools, comparative linguistics, and the discovery of a wealth of ancient texts and artifacts have contributed immensely to our understanding the rich tapestry and complexity of biblical texts. Much also has improved since the 1970s as a result of the literary revolution in biblical scholarship. After generations of dissecting the Torah and the rest of Tanakh, many Bible scholars have recognized that the Torah and later biblical books can be analyzed effectively as unified texts. Every word is valuable. Passages are multilayered. Understanding the interplay between texts is vital.

Great traditional scholars of the previous generation such as the authors and editors of the *Da'at Mikra* commentary series,[4] Professor Nehama Leibowitz,[5] and Rabbi Mordechai Breuer,[6] exemplified different aspects of how one could benefit from the information and methodology of academic Bible scholarship through the prism of traditional faith. Similarly, the prolific writings of leading contemporary rabbinic scholars such as Yoel Bin?Nun,[7] Elhanan Samet,[8] and Shalom Carmy[9] are intellectually and spiritually stimulating, as they benefit from the academy while working from the viewpoint of the yeshivah.[10]

The ideal learning framework espouses traditional beliefs and studies as a means to a religious end 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.

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.[11] The academy also must become more aware of its own underlying biases.[12]

Ultimately, we must recognize the strengths and weaknesses in the approaches of the yeshivah 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. It also enables us to build bridges within our community.

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."[13]

The eternally relevant vision of the Torah and prophets is available for the taking. What we make of the journey is up to us, to learn and transform, and work on building the ideal self and society envisioned by our prophetic tradition as we develop our own relationships between God and humanity through the inspired words of Tanakh.

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] Some of this article is adapted from Hayyim Angel, Editor's Introduction in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel. *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. v–vii; Hayyim Angel, "The Yeshivah and the Academy: How We Can Learn from One Another in Biblical Scholarship," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 19–29; reprinted in *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 28–35; *Conversations* 20 (Fall 2014), pp. 91–97.

[2] See R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad HaYom HaZeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013). See also review essay of Hayyim Angel, "Faith and Scholarship Can Walk Together: Rabbi Amnon Bazak on the Challenges of Academic Bible Study in Traditional Learning," *Tradition* 47:3 (Fall 2014), pp. 78–88.

[3] R. 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.

[4] After completing the series, two of its leading contributors and editors, Yehudah Kiel and Amos Hakham, wrote a short book describing the history and goals of the series, *Epilogue to the Da'at Mikra Commentary* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 2003).

[5] For more on her work, see especially Yael Unterman, *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2009); *Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume* (Hebrew), ed. Moshe Ahrend, Ruth Ben-Meir, and Gavriel H. Cohn (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 2001); Hayyim Angel, Review Essay: "*Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*: The Paradox of *Parshanut*: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators?" *Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004), pp. 112–128; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 56–76; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 39–59; *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 36–57; *Conversations* 21 (Winter 2015), pp. 127–144.

[6] For analysis of R. Breuer's method, see R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad HaYom HaZeh*, pp. 109–139; R. Shalom Carmy, "Concepts of Scripture in Mordechai Breuer," in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 267–279; R. Meir Ekstein, "Rabbi Mordechai Breuer and Modern Orthodox Biblical Commentary," *Tradition* 33:3 (Spring 1999), pp. 6–23. For a collection of R. Breuer's articles on his methodology, and important responses to his work, see *The Theory of Aspects of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer* (Hebrew), ed. Yosef Ofer (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2005). For case studies of R. Breuer's methodology, see especially R. Breuer's *Pirkei Mo'adot* (Jerusalem: Horev, 1989), *Pirkei Bereshit* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1998), and *Pirkei Mikra'ot* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2009).

[7] For an overview of R. Bin-Nun's methodology, including citations to many of his published articles through 2006, see Hayyim Angel, "*Torat Hashem Temima:* The Contributions of Rav Yoel Bin-Nun to Religious Tanakh Study," *Tradition* 40:3 (Fall 2007), pp. 5–18; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 30–47.

[8] *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavua* (series 1, 2, and 3), ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot, 2002, 2004, 2012). For an overview of R. Samet's methodology, see Hayyim Angel, "Review of Rabbi Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha?Shavua*," in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 21–33; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 6–18. See also R. Samet's books, *Pirkei Eliyahu* (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot, 2003), *Pirkei Elisha* (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot, 2007), *Iyyunim BeMizmorei Tehillim* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2012). Many of his articles are archived in English translation at the Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion, at http://www.vbm-torah.org.

[9] R. Carmy gives an overview of his own methodology in “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, 1996), pp. 1–38. See also especially his “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; “Always Connect,” in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 1–12. For a bibliography of his published writings through 2012, see *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy by Friends and Students in Celebration of Forty Years of Teaching*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2012), pp. 403–414.
[10] For further discussion and references, see Hayyim Angel, “The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh,” afterword to Moshe Sokolow, *Tanakh: An Owner’s Manual: Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), pp. 192–207; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn’t So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 118–136.
[11] Cf. 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 medievals, and many of their brightest insights are absent from later exegesis” (*Anchor Bible 18A: Proverbs 1–9* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], p. 12).
[12] See R. Yitzchak Blau, “Reading Morality Out of the Bible,” *Bekhol Derakhekha Da’ehu* 29 (2014), pp. 7–13.
[13] R. Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York: Ktav, 1971), pp. 124–125.