THE EVER GROWING TORAH MODEL: A portrait of Moses as a young man, national leader, and teaching model

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This engaging monograph is a deceptively simple read. Written in a disciplined, clear diction, Rabbi Zvi Grumet writes and teaches like a High School Yeshiva rebbe, unflinchingly focusing on the received Torah's text and message[s], as lucidly and probingly as he can, so that his student/reader may understand his content and internalize the Torah's normative message. The superficially scholarly reader will likely be disappointed because Grumet avoids all jargon, esotericisms, and technical terms that might confuse, distract, or otherwise disturb the targeted "non-academic" Orthodox reader. He is not writing to, or for, the secular scholarly community, at least as his first audience. As such, Grumet's Moses and the Path to Leadership's literary genre is Talmud Torah, not Academic Bible scholarship.

Grumet's monograph presents Moses not as a human superhero, but as a great person, with flaws and limits, struggling to master himself as he is commissioned to lead God's people, Israel. Moses the prophet evolves into Moses the teacher; over his career Moses struggles with, and eventually overcomes, his propensity to rage. We initially find Moses the moral agent as a young man who leaves the Pharaonic palace to join his enslaved Israelite brethren, and whose first act is to kill, in righteous indignation, an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite. But he also intervenes when an Israelite bully beats/is about to beat a fellow Israelite, and he saves Midianite women from Midianite male shepherds. Moses is the man of morality, courage, and strength. God calls on Moses because of these prior dispositions, as well as the "management" skill that Moses acquires during his years as a Midianite shepherd.

The monograph precisely—and convincingly traces how Moses grows and falters, directs his zeal to and for God as well as to and for Israel, and concludes with showing how Moses negotiates with the two tribes who wish to possess Transjordan land for their heritage. By the end of his career, Moses has developed an emotional as well as intellectual intelligence; he is

able to hear the words and peer into the heart of the “other,” and to respond appropriately. In his Deuteronomic valedictory, Moses reviews his own career, but from a human rather than Divine perspective, providing the first instance of a retold Bible, a genre that will become more popular in Second Commonwealth Judaism. By stressing the difference between Moses’ human memory and God’s divine record, Grumet documents and legitimates the propriety of the Midrashic method, that he expertly applies.

Because he is writing to/for an intelligent, informed modern Orthodox lay audience, Grumet assumes zero Academic training on the part of his readers, but he does focus on the religious, existential questions that confront his target population: (a) what does it mean to be a good human being, (b) how do we confront ourselves and our weaknesses, (c) what should we expect from our leaders—and followers, (d) how do we continue to learn, grow, and mature in the course of our adult lives, and (e) how does the modern Orthodox Jewish reader confront the Jewish sacred canon?

Unlike the Academic Biblicist, Grumet starts with a priori assumptions. For Grumet, the Torah is a literary whole, it reveals a literary, and ideological coherence, and has a critically important message, from God, to proclaim. In this regard, Grumet’s Moses and the Path to Leadership is foremost an exemplar of Orthodox Jewish Bible scholarship, called “Talmud Torah.”

But unlike the conventional approach to Bible common to many Orthodox synagogues and schools, where the Bible text is read and revered, but subtly actually rejected because it is too “holy” to be understood or to be applied in everyday life, Grumet believes that the Torah text is readable, approachable, understandable, and applicable to everyday life. He dares to subject Moses to Torah review; in most Orthodox settings, the student is forbidden to dare to assess those who are greater than oneself on the Political-Theological socially accepted Orthodox food chain. Failing to find this restraining norm, that elites are immune to assessment, in Israel’s sacred canon, Grumet the educator subjects each Jew to mutual self-evaluation, with the “hidden curricular” aim to mold and nurture better Torah informed human beings. Like the great medieval Jewish scholars whose words are memorialized in the “Rabbinic Bible,” Grumet asserts the very same intellectual freedom that his medieval forbearers exercised, and refuses to allow the Torah to be reduced to an oracle understandable only to a self-select, theologically correct clique. After all, the Torah was given to all Israel, i.e. the collective “us,” and not to any self-selecting elite. Because Grumet correctly, astutely, and courageously asserts his right to read and offer his own reasoned judgment, a right not forbidden in and therefore implicitly authorized by the Torah, Grumet’s Moses and the Path to Leadership is also a modern as well as Orthodox book.

Moses and the Path to Leadership is however much more than an Orthodox reading of Torah. The untrained lay eye will miss the monograph’s academic depth because it is written in the idiom of Talmud Torah and not Wissenschaft des Judentums. Grumet is nevertheless keenly aware of Academic Bible scholarship, and uses its tools, and cites its findings very well. Like Drs. Yael Ziegler, Meir Weiss, Gavriel Cohen, Ernst Simon, and Nehama Leibowitz, Grumet reads the Torah as a literary critic. In Grumet’s case, the American New Criticism is the “Bible Criticism” he applies adeptly, appropriately, and insightfully. This academic approach assumes that the given text creates a world, and that every word in the document is a datum waiting to be decoded, which then serves as a window into the mind and world of the author. By comparing different Biblical narratives synoptically, one beside the other as opposed to a superficial linear reading, the critic need not and indeed dare not posit different sources, but instead discovers, by dint of juxtaposition, different moods, contending points of view, and conflicting insights into the art and ethic presented by the writer.

By finding literary, and therefore theological coherence in the Torah in general, and from this reviewer's perspective, the book of Numbers in particular, Zvi Grumet has offered a very important secondary source of Bible exegesis and an even more significantly, a primary source proclaiming what it means to be "modern Orthodox." An aspiring Bible scholar who never finished his Ph.D., who taught me in Hebrew High School [c.a. 1960], failed to find meaningful coherence in his research on "The Redaction of Numbers." Another leading contemporary Jewish Bible critic told me that "Numbers is where the stories that have no other place in the Torah were placed." If one reads Torah (a) with philology and (b) the academic culture's dogma that inconsistencies and discrepancies testify to a haphazard composition that is by definition bereft of coherency, one is not programmed to entertain the possibility of coherency or literary unity. But Grumet has found coherency in the Torah, with this coherency expressing itself with the moral message of Bildung, that sees education as a life-long enterprise that, if engaged, sanctifies those who partake in and of it. Unlike Nehama Leibowitz, Grumet never criticizes Bible Criticism. He merely avoids discussing its concerns in his Orthodox context because, since he is doing Talmud Torah and not secular research, such conversation is, by dint of genre and audience, epistemologically inappropriate.

Grumet is however suggesting a radical re-consideration of Bible Criticism's findings. Rather than dismiss the Academic Bible study enterprise as a "heresy," a concern that entered Judaism in response to the Christian critique of Judaism, he suggests that aspects of Academic Bible study are incompatible with his enterprise, Talmud Torah, because it denies the possibility of textual Torah coherency. Those familiar with Academic Bible study will discover that Grumet is not unaware of their writings and findings, but that he actually employs many of its tools, albeit selectively. Grumet does summon the critical literature on psychology and education in order to explicate Moses' development as a round and developing character.

Thus, there is much more than meets the untrained lay modern Orthodox eye in this intellectually engaging work. Grumet addresses, with respect and with acuity, the challenge of Academic Bible study. Like R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who in "Confrontation" finds two alternative, inconsistent, and juxtaposed Creation Narratives, and who views these narratives as complimentary literary typologies rather than as two historically verifiable records, Grumet's Moses is a typological ideal who has become "the" Jewish hero. In "Confrontation," R. Soloveitchik offers an alternative to the Academic Biblicist consensus that Genesis' first creation narrative is a late P(riestly) composition that was placed before an earlier JE creation, without raising eyebrows and theological doubts, of his believing, Orthodox target audience. And like R. Soloveitchik, Grumet is religiously responsible to his audience community because Jewish scholarship is not intellectually neutral; one does not study Torah with scholarly disinterest. The Orthodox Jew studies Torah "to hear the word of the Lord," and not to merely satisfy one's curiosity.

While written with footnotes and academic rigor, Moses and the Path to Leadership remains an Orthodox exercise in Talmud Torah. And by daring to probe, explore, question, and search, working within the epistemological constrains of historically accepted Jewish definitions, Grumet's modesty, simplicity, and pedagogically sensitive narrative commentary is a masked polemic couched in strategic, unmistakable understatement. Following his teacher R. Soloveitchik, he filters information, academically processed, so that it is presented in a pedagogic and pastoral format that his audience community is conditioned to accept. But following his own conscience, professional skills, academic proclivities, and intellectual curiosity, Grumet affirms his God-given right to learn Torah on his own, to make up his mind, and to arrive at his own reasoned conclusions. For Grumet, Torah is not merely a political franchise of institutionally endorsed great rabbis; it is, after all, the "possession of the

Congregation of Jacob.” He, and his reader, share the right to an informed opinion, and their own finite portion in that infinite enterprise called Torah.

It is this mindset that marks Rabbi Zvi Grumet as a worthy link in the Mosaic chain, who not only carries the courage to be both modern and Orthodox, but who shares and teaches this mindset to others.

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