

Abraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook

There is no contradiction between anything in the Torah and any scientific theory in the world, but we are not obligated to accept speculation as though it were fact—even if it has many adherents—because they are like a wilting flower. Soon enough, the tools of exploration will be more developed; all these new-fangled theories will be put to shame, and all the lofty sciences of our day will be proven false “and the word of our Lord will be sustained forever.” (Ig’rot vol. I #91; Sivan, 1905)

Norman Lamm

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.”

Yehudah Kiel

A contemporary exegete is required, of course, to examine things in the light of contemporary knowledge.... If he does so, then he is following in the footsteps of the ancients even if he disagrees with them in a thousand details. However, one who only copies the ancients, shutting his eyes to newly discovered facts and knowledge, is abandoning the ways of the ancients and is rebelling against them.

Mordechai Breuer

What connection is there between all these [critical] arguments, which are demonstrable, legitimate, and well-founded, and the authentic Jewish belief that the Torah comes from heaven and that it preceded Creation by 974 generations? For even if the accuracy of biblical criticism were to be proven, its conclusions do not affect the pure Jewish faith even one iota. Moreover, the scientific conclusions of biblical criticism not only are harmless to faith but are essential and mandatory for anyone who seeks to interpret the Bible—according to its *peshat* as well as its *derash*.

דעת מקרא Da`at Mikra

Aware of the impact that critical Bible scholarship had in academic circles and beyond, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook inspired his student Rabbi Moshe Zeidel to embark on an ambitious project. Under Rabbi Zeidel's leadership, a group of scholars convened in 1956 and carefully formulated the underlying principles for a new, verse-by-verse traditional commentary on the entire Tanakh. In 1963, the first assignments were given out for individual biblical books. The first two volumes of the series were published in 1970, and its final volume was published in 2003. This monumental project, entitled *Da'at Mikra* (literally, "Knowledge of Scripture") and published by Mossad Harav Kook in Jerusalem, incorporates the gamut of traditional interpretation as well as modern research.

Yehudah Kiel

The editorial board reached the conclusion that it is appropriate to arrange Daat Mikra in several layers one atop the other and one alongside the other.

1. The first level is the biblical text, utilizing the Aleppo codex and related manuscripts, edited according to the best knowledge available to us.
2. In the commentary to the Torah, as well as to Song of Songs, we have placed alongside the textual level the commentary of Rashi, edited by Rabbi Chavel according to the best manuscripts available to him. We have set it in ordinary Hebrew type and vocalized it to make it accessible to all to study.
3. The commentary itself is also vocalized to facilitate reading. Throughout this level, there are maps and illustrations that are an inseparable part of the commentary.
4. Below the commentary, in smaller print, are the notes that form the fourth level, whose purpose is to support the commentary or elaborate on it, or even to cite another opinion in a case in which the exegetes are divided.
5. The editorial board also decided to precede each chapter by a thematic introduction bearing literary markers—at its opening or closing or both—to determine the chapter's content and divisions. The introduction also serves to give a reason for the incorporation of that chapter within the larger context of the book.
6. A summary of the chapter highlighting its essential contents and its significance for this, and later generations.
7. The introduction to the entire book and appendices containing a summary of all the contents of the book focusing on its unity and examining its literary structure. Subjects that cannot be contained in the introduction are brought in an appendix. The introductions to most books are books in themselves, and anyone who wishes to obtain a perspective on the entire Tanakh should combine the separate introductions.

ATLAS Da`at Mikra

וְנָהַר יֵצֵא מֵעֵדֶן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת-הַגֶּן וּמִשָּׁם יִפְרֹד וְהָיָה לְאַרְבָּעָה רִאשִׁים: שֵׁם הָאֶחָד פִּישׁוֹן הוּא הַסֹּבֵב אֶת כָּל-אֶרֶץ הַחֲוִילָה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם הַזָּהָב: וְשֵׁם-הַנָּהָר הַשֵּׁנִי גִיחוֹן הוּא הַסֹּבֵב אֶת כָּל-אֶרֶץ כּוּשׁ: וְשֵׁם הַנָּהָר הַשְּׁלִישִׁי תִּיגִיִּס הוּא הַלֹּךְ קְדָמָת אַשּׁוּר וְהַנָּהָר הָרְבִיעִי הוּא פְּרָת:

A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is **Pishon**, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. The name of the second river is **Gihon**, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is **Tigris**, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the **Euphrates**.



מקרא לישראל Mikra' L'Yisrael

A novel, professional Bible commentary that relies on the stages of Jewish culture throughout the generations. Its objectives are:

- To consider the best available information regarding the biblical text
- Paying attention to its ancient translations and its evolution over time
- Values the artistic dimension of the Bible recognizing the different literary types within it
- In light of extra-biblical parallels
- Classical and modern commentaries
- Applying the best information about Biblical Hebrew based on comparative Semitics and modern lexicography and grammar
- To cite the opinions of modern scholarship on the evolution of the canon, including the mutual relationships of different biblical books
- To describe realia in light of the latest archaeological artifacts and historical theories
- To examine the ideational world of the Bible in light of biblical and post-biblical thought
- To present to the reader deliberations that arose over time regarding specific exegetical or historical matters that reflect the role of the Bible in Jewish and non-Jewish culture.

Uriel Simon (Jonah)

Reading Prophetic Narratives (Bloomington, 1997)

- Biblical stories were meant for readers, not critics; hence any criticism must be based on reading. The inner significance of a great work is apparent only to someone who is willing and able to read it as part of its target audience.
- Because of our great distance from Scripture and its world, however, we cannot attain an unmediated and naïve reading of it. Just as the language of Scripture cannot be properly understood without philological research, so must the norms of scriptural narrative be investigated in order to reduce the gap between our own reading habits and those of the readers of antiquity.
- Every generation is rooted in its own existential situation, searches Scripture for answers to its specific spiritual needs, and reads it through the exegetical methods it considers to be reliable.
- In this way, every authentic exegetical method opens a door to another one of the “seventy facets” of Scripture.

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun

One of the most influential Tanakh teachers today, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun of Herzog College presents a more comprehensive approach to the Tanakh than many of his colleagues, a result of his unusual ability to address historical-archaeological scholarship on a serious level. He combines expertise in Tanakh, *Hazal*, *parshanut*, *halakhah*, history, archaeology, linguistics, and theology. He actively confronts biblical criticism by using its own tools of scholarship to respond to its challenges. Rabbi Breuer, in his writings, steered clear of historical criticism, concentrating exclusively on literary issues. Rabbi Bin-Nun, in contrast, believes that these disciplines, when studied responsibly, combine harmoniously, and deepen our understanding of the Tanakh and other areas of Jewish thought. Here is a representative example.

Joshua: Text, Archaeology, and Theology

Chapters 1–12 of Joshua convey the impression that Israel’s conquest of the Land of Canaan was complete. Chapters 13–19 then list many unconquered cities. Aware of these discrepancies, traditional commentators attempted to harmonize them. For example, Radak (Joshua 11:23) suggested that Israel secured the borders of the land, creating the wherewithal to conquer the rest of the land over time. Alternatively, Ralbag suggested that since the major battles had ended, it was as though the entire land had been conquered.

With the rise of secular literary and historical scholarship, more iconoclastic suggestions were raised. Many scholars argued that Joshua 1–12 and 13–19 represented conflicting traditions. Archaeologists insisted that the total conquest described in Joshua had not been corroborated by findings in Israel dated to that period; rather, the available evidence suggested a gradual settlement of the land.

With his expertise both in Tanakh and in history and archaeology, Rabbi Bin-Nun is uniquely qualified to refute these arguments. According to the narratives in the Book of Joshua, only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were burned to the ground. Contrary to our initial impression of a total conquest, some of the thirty-one defeated cities listed in Joshua 12 could not be immediately conquered even *after* Joshua’s victories (e.g., Jerusalem in 12:10, 15:63; Gezer in 12:12, 16:10). Rabbi Bin-Nun concludes, therefore, that most of Israel’s victories were of one army against another in the battlefield. The campaign described in Joshua 1–12, then, broke the back of the Canaanite military coalitions but did not necessarily extend to the conquest of their cities.

Thus, a comprehensive reading of the Book of Joshua suggests a gradual settlement of the land, since most cities remained in Canaanite hands. Similarly, archaeologists should not expect to uncover any more than three destroyed cities dating to Joshua’s period: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. Rabbi Bin-Nun argues that archaeological evidence corroborates the destruction of Ai and Hazor in Joshua’s time (elsewhere he wrote a full-length article concerning the proper identification of Ai), and we do not have conclusive evidence one way or the other from current findings in Jericho. In sum, the archaeological record is largely consistent with the account in the Tanakh, if only one reads the text and considers the archaeological evidence carefully.

Rabbi Bin-Nun's textual-historical analysis is also significant in his separate treatment of the ethical ramifications of the war against the Canaanites. As noted above, Joshua engaged the Canaanites in a military battle rather than a war of annihilation against men, women, and children. While the war against the Canaanites was a battle against immorality, Israel retained her strong ethical character, and fought only out of necessity. He demonstrates a strong link between the textual complexities in Joshua, the connection to what has and has not been unearthed by contemporary archaeologists, and the religious ramifications of the conquest.



A Multidisciplinary Torah Commentary

1. Rabbinic midrash and exegesis (mostly *Rishonim*), arranged topically, and parallels
2. Biblical language; analysis of *Masorah* and cantillation marks
3. The order of the *parashiyot*, and the narrative structure
4. Scientific background: history, geography, archaeology
5. New exegesis, according to the principle established by Rashbam of "innovative *p'shat*"

Lawrence H. Schiffman

The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature

Ancient Near Eastern literature has been a rapidly expanding corpus since archaeologists began digging up clay tablets in Mesopotamia and Syria, hieroglyphic documents in Egypt, and inscriptions on stone in Canaan/Israel. These documents testify to the advanced cultures in which Israel developed and also to the simultaneously close and contrasting relationships between Israelite religion—emerging Judaism—and the religions of its neighbors. In fact, these texts show the specifics of the unique contribution of the Bible to human civilization, something that should be a matter of pride to students. At the same time, in the hands of some, these texts can be misrepresented as detracting from the greatness of biblical tradition.

Let me give a few examples. From the Atrahasis epic, we learn of one particular version of the Mesopotamian creation and flood epic. If we look at this text, we see immediately the contrast between the Atrahasis account and the biblical story. In this creation story, we see humanity created to serve the gods, not as the pinnacle of creation. Further, the god does not breathe his spirit into man, but expectorates into the dirt to create him. Again, here we see that humanity has no great aspirations; humans are not “a little lower than the angels” (Ps. 8:6), created in the image of God, but earthy creatures. The flood takes place in this Mesopotamian epic not because of the sinfulness of humanity, a moral issue, but because some of the gods think that humans made too much noise. Here, again, the moral stance of the Bible is absent, and all that matters is the capricious desire of the gods—similar to the Greek pantheon. The well-known flood epic of Gilgamesh, read by many in college humanities courses, also provides numerous biblical parallels, and can be discussed from the moral and ethical point of view as well. Despite the very different way in which these stories are told, the widespread account of a great flood leads us to assume that there must have been some historical event that was recorded by all these ancient civilizations.

בראשית יא:ה וַיֵּרַד ה' לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם:

The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that humanity had built.

Rashi: But whose children could they have been (except the children of man, i.e. human beings) — perhaps the children of donkeys or camels?

When we look at the great law codes of Mesopotamia, we find a similar differentiation between Mesopotamian codes and the Bible. In the Prologue to the eighteenth century B.C.E. Code of Hammurabi, there is a call for true justice in the name of the gods. However, even free people are treated unequally, the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye) is actually understood and presumably applied literally, and justice is ultimately determined through trial by ordeal. In all these Mesopotamian cases, one can truly understand the innovation represented by biblical morals and standards of justice.

Rabbi Elhanan Samet

Another exemplar of the literary-theological approach is Rabbi Elhanan Samet, who also teaches at Herzog College. *Torah she-be-al peh*, classical commentators and thinkers, ancient Near Eastern sources, and literary tools all contribute to his analyses, but Rabbi Samet is careful to weigh all of these against the *peshat* of the biblical text. Professor Nehama Leibowitz, the master of using Midrash and *parshanut* to teach text, expressed concern that her emphasis on commentators might distract some readers to replace text study with *parshanut* learning.¹ With his increased focus on text analysis, Rabbi Samet keeps his text-centered agenda at the forefront. Here are two representative examples of his work.

The Central Pivot of a Narrative

One of Rabbi Samet's hallmark literary techniques is to divide a passage—narrative or legal—in half. For example, in *Vayezei* (first series), he contends that the entire *parashah* forms a literary unit. The center of the unit demarcates a turning point that changes the course of the story. *Parashat Vayezei* is 148 verses long. Precisely at its center (30:27–28), Laban invited Jacob to remain and work for wages. Surprisingly, Jacob agreed to stay for an indeterminate period, rather than returning to Canaan.

This turning point signals a transition from a positive first half to a negative second half. In the first half of the *parashah*, Jacob built his family. In the second half, however, Jacob remained in Haran merely to earn money, something he could have done at home as well. Jacob's wealth aroused the jealousy of Laban's family and led him to unwittingly curse Rachel. To support his reading, Rabbi Samet quotes a Midrash that criticizes Jacob for lingering with Laban:

God said to him, "Return to the land of your ancestors and I will be with you—your father is waiting for you, your mother is waiting for you, I Myself am waiting for you!" Rabbi Ammi said in the name of Reish Lakish: "Possessions acquired outside of Israel have no blessing associated with them; return to the land of your ancestors and I will be with you" (*Genesis Rabbah* 74).

There is no ethical problem with earning a living; however, Jacob was obligated to return to the land of his ancestors to fulfill the vow he had made in Bethel and to honor his parents.

¹ "In Elementary and High Schools, we do not study *parshanut* or exegetical methodology for their own sake; rather, we study Torah with the assistance of its interpreters. And if, God forbid, the Torah should be pushed to the side—whether its stories and laws, its teachings and ideas, its guidance and beauty—because of overemphasis on its interpreters, then any small gain my book achieves will be lost at a greater expense." *Limud Parshanei ha-Torah u-Derakhim le-Hora'atam: Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 1975), Introduction, p. 1.