

BOOK REVIEW

Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah by Moshe Shammah. Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2011, 1165 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

This very interesting book is a modern *peshat* commentary to the Torah. The author, an Orthodox rabbi, correctly observes that there is a lack of material dealing with the plain, primary meaning of the Torah while at the same time taking into account modern biblical scholarship and ancient Near Eastern studies, yet nevertheless accepting that the Masoretic Text is unified and divinely inspired (p. xx). This book is intended to fill that void.

The book contains a few topical essays for each of the weekly Torah readings. In just about each essay there is a new insight to be found, opening new avenues of thought and investigation for the interested reader. Refreshing and innovative approaches are seen throughout the book. When was the last time you heard an Orthodox rabbi refer to the Tower of Babel narrative as a "literary parody that was designed to deride the culture that was symbolized by the construction of vast temple-towers" (p. 51)? Or explaining that the Cain and Abel story must be viewed as an allegory (p.25)? Or asserting that there were "early drafts" of the current biblical text before the inspired Masoretic text (p. xx)? Though regularly found in academic Bible studies, these ideas skirt the edge of what many would consider a traditional Torah commentary, yet they occur in almost every chapter of the book.

The author repeatedly draws comparisons and points out contrasts with the laws and customs of the ancient Near East, allowing the reader to fully appreciate the Torah's innovations (for example, pp. 953-962). He explains that, according to the Torah, a woman is presumed to have been forced into an adulterous relationship unless it is proven that she consented, whereas there was a presumption of her guilt in other ancient societies (p. 956). A very interesting example of such comparisons is the author's discussion of "an eye for an eye," where he shows that even according to the Code of Hammurabi this law was not understood literally (p. 405). Readers accustomed to the rabbinic interpretation of Torah laws may be surprised to learn that the *peshat*

sometimes presents a different view. Thus, for example, relations with the "beautiful woman" captured in war (Deuteronomy 21) are strictly forbidden before the one-month waiting period is completed, as opposed to the rabbinic view that this waiting period refers to the second instance of sexual relations (p. 954).

Occasionally, the author does turn his attention to the Midrash, but always interprets it in a non-literal way, as a homily coming to teach a lesson or value. He repeatedly points out that it is important to distinguish the simple meaning of the text from the rabbinic *derash* layered upon that text. For example, "the Esau of the Bible was nothing like he is portrayed in these [mid-rashic] sources" (p. 128). The Sages depicted a villainous Esau who never made up with Jacob to represent their view of the relationship between Rome/Christianity and the Jews, not as an actual characterization of Esau himself.

One notion that the author returns to periodically is the idea taught by his teacher, Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon, that numbers in the Bible "were generally not intended to be taken literally" (p. 1057). This includes census figures and the years that individuals lived. Different numbers contain different symbolic meanings: for example, seven refers to completion, eight refers to the covenant between God and Israel, and the number thirteen represents the concept of the oneness of God. This is the reason why the term *berit* appears eight times in the Noah narrative (p.1059), among other literary patterns, and why the total count of King David's census came to 1,300,000 (p. 1062). While not every example of the use of these symbolic numbers is convincing, many are very thought-provoking.

This volume stands out on the crowded bookshelf of traditional Torah interpretation as a lone voice of *peshat* in a sea of *derash*, well researched, engaging, full of interest, and thought-provoking. What remains to be seen is whether and how it will be incorporated in the world of Orthodox Torah commentary and what impact it may have.