CAN ONE CRITICIZE THE BIBLICAL HEROES?

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Whether one can criticize the heroes of the Bible or not depends on whether one may study the Bible at "eye-level" (in Hebrew *be-gova eynayim*). Judging a biblical character at eye-level is the contemporary terminology for looking at him eye to eye and relating to his behavior as being acceptable, and even commendable, or otherwise – as if he were a contemporary. Those who reject this approach consider their eye level to be far below that of the heroes of the Bible, who, so to speak, look down from above, upon man. Their approach may be termed the superior-being approach, since they look upon the biblical heroes as people whose lives existed on a higher plane than that of later generations. From the point of view of the eye-level advocates, superior-being advocates frequently indulge in apologetics and hagiography.

The eye-level versus the superior-being approach comes into play in the following three situations:

1. The Bible presents many scenarios without commenting positively or negatively about the behavior of the characters involved. The preference of most of the classical Jewish commentators is to interpret the actions of the biblical heroes in a positive fashion. However, some commentators allow themselves the freedom to criticize the biblical actors even where the Bible itself has not expressed an opinion.

2. Many midrashim present extra-biblical heroic stories about biblical characters. The source of such stories could be long-standing tradition on the one hand, or inventions of the story-teller on the other, for the purpose of inculcating an important lesson.

3. There exist stories in which the Bible itself describes the protagonist as behaving in an improper and even anti-*halachic* manner.

This paper will confine itself mainly to instances of the first and third type.[1]

ORIGINS OF THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The different approaches described are represented in the Talmudic and midrashic literature. R. Yehoshua Rice sees the two approaches reflected in the schools of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael.[2] The former tended toward the superior-being approach, and TB *Menahot* 29b says of him that he was

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able to expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws. On the other hand, Rabbi Ishmael was wont to say: *dibra Torah bi-leshon bnei adam*, i.e. the Torah speaks in accordance with the language of men.[3] R. Aaron Lichtenstein has pointed out that the Torah calls itself the book of the history of mankind: *This is the book of the generations of Adam* (Gen. 5:1), and, as mentioned, it describes mankind using commonplace phraseology.[4] But how can one describe super-human beings using routine language, and in what sense can a book using such language provide the reader with an historical account?

The Talmud intersperses sayings expressive of both approaches. On the one hand, it is stated in TB *Shabbat* 112b: If the earlier [scholars] were sons of angels, we are sons of men; and if the earlier [scholars] were sons of men, we are like asses, and not [even] like asses of R. Hanina b. Dosa and R. Phinhas b. Yair (who would not eat untithed grain), but like other asses. On the other hand, it says in TB *Arakhin* 17a: R. Eliezer the great said: If the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to enter in judgment with Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, not [even] they could stand before His reproof!

Researchers have attempted to relate the approach chosen by the sages at various periods to contemporary events. Dr. Gilad Sasson concluded in his M.A. thesis that the tendency of the Tannaim was to make every effort to vindicate the patriarchs, while the Amoraim frequently allowed themselves to be more critical. In the event that the Tannaim reproved the patriarchs, the rebuke appeared only in Amoraic sources.[5]

According to Sasson, the Tannaim lived at a time when Hellenism was prevalent, and they did not want to provide additional ammunition to the Hellenists who were very critical of Judaism. Even if the Tannaim felt that certain actions by the patriarchs were mistaken, their opinion did not appear in any of the written works of the period. By the time of the Amoraim, the main antagonists were the Christians, who claimed that God had forsaken the Jews because of their sins and because they had not accepted the Christian messiah. Under these circumstances, the rabbis felt that it was important to publicize that in spite of the failings of the patriarchs, God abandoned neither them nor their nation.

R. Rice singles out another period in Jewish history where external events might have affected the choice of approach to biblical characters. In the early tenth century, the Karaites, who believed in the written law exclusively, had a

strong presence. To counteract their negative influence, Zemach Gaon attempted to steer young students away from unadulterated Bible study. Instead, they were to concentrate on the midrashic approach as it appears in the oral teachings, which were the source of the talmudic and midrashic literature. The reaction of Saadia Gaon was the opposite. He chose to stress Bible study and the development of methods of exegesis based on the simple meaning of the text in order to outdo the Karaites using their own techniques.[6]

THE TALMUDIC APPROACH TO CRITICIZING BIBLICAL FIGURES

TB *Shabbat* 55b-56b quotes seven instances in which the Bible states quite explicitly that various biblical characters sinned. In each case, R. Samuel ben Nahmani reinterprets the verses in a way which lightens, or even completely erases, the alleged violation, thus adopting the hagiographic approach. On the other hand, in every case, there are those (mainly the *amora* Rab) who tend to take the incriminating verses literally.

As an example, Genesis 35:22 describes an apparent sexual encounter between Jacob's oldest son Reuben and his father's concubine Bilhah, *Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine*. In discussing this case, TB *Shabbat* 55b explains that Reuben resented the fact that when Rachel died, Jacob moved his bed from Rachel's tent to that of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden, rather than to the tent of his mother Leah. In order for Reuben to rectify the situation, he had to enter Bilhah's private premises, and the invasion of her privacy is termed by the verse as lying with her.

Maharsha (Shmuel Eidels, 1555-1631) explains that Reuben's transgression was that he didn't realize that Jacob had actually freed Bilhah from her slavery. As a free woman, she would have been prohibited to Reuben by the Noahide law forbidding adultery,[7] as well as by the future law prohibiting relations with his father's wife (Lev. 18:8). According to Maharsha, the Talmud is stating that the very thought that Bilhah would have been permitted to him, even though he didn't act upon it, was enough for the verse to describe it as if he lay with her.

However, the Talmud points out that there are two Tannaim, R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, who actually take the verse literally, i.e. that Reuben in fact slept with Bilhah. According to one explanation,[8] the two Tannaim differ only as to whether concubinage involves formal marital sanctification, in which case

Reuben committed adultery, or whether it does not, in which case his sin involved embarrassing and displaying disrespect for his father. Either way, the transgression was serious enough to serve as the entire content of Jacob's parting negative description of Reuben in Genesis 49:4, *Your impetuosity is like* [unstable] *water; you shall not be superior, because you ascended your father's bed. Then you profaned my couch by going up.*. On the other hand, two other Tannaim, R. Gamliel and R. Elazar the Modiite, maintain the apologetic explanation of the verses.

The Talmud attempts to prove that Reuben didn't sin by an analysis of the two halves of verse 22, which states in its entirety: *And it came to pass, while Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it.* [P] *Now the sons of Jacob were twelve*. The Talmud takes this to imply that the sons were all equally righteous. The last phrase actually belongs with the continuation of the narrative, where the names of Jacob's twelve sons are listed, and Maharsha explains that it should actually have been separated from the previous text as an independent verse. Instead, verse 22 is maintained as one verse, but the tail phrase is incorporated in the following paragraph (indicated by the letter P), to show that although thematically it belongs with the following portion, it sheds light on the beginning of the verse by indicating that Reuben was no more of a sinner in spite of the seemingly contemptible act described at the beginning of the verse.

R. Chanoch Gebhart, a modern commentator expresses the viewpoint of many who do not accept the eye-level approach, and are not willing to accept the possibility that any Tanna would have allowed criticism of the behavior of the patriarchs.[9] In spite of the fact that the aforementioned Tannaim (R. Eliezer and R. Joshua) used harsh words to describe Reuben's transgression,[10] in his view their intention is not to say that a physical relationship took place, but rather that the method he used to make his point, namely the moving of Jacob's bed out of Bilhah's tent, was inappropriate. However, since the Talmud had previously mentioned the two opposing verses, one of which implied a physical act, and a second which implied that there had not been such an act, it would seem that this is what the Tannaim were disputing. Maharsha says that R. Eliezer and R. Joshua both agree that Reuben committed adultery, prohibited by Noahide law. Their only argument is whether cohabiting

with one's father's wife was additionally prohibited as one of the Noahide laws, or whether it was not included in the Noahide laws, but still highly disrespectful, and also frowned upon because it would eventually be forbidden by Torah law.

The question of whether the Bible can be studied at eye-level or not was already extant at the time of the Talmud, and has persisted throughout the Middle Ages until this very day.

THE DISPUTE CONTINUES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Ramban is not convinced by the Talmudic exoneration of Reuben. He explains: "Scripture relates Jacob's humility. He heard that his son had profaned his couch, but yet he did not command them to remove him from his house and from inclusion among his sons so that he should not inherit with them. Instead, he is counted among them, as it is written, *And the sons of Jacob were twelve*, and he is counted first. It is for this reason that Scripture has combined the two sections of the Torah through one verse. For although this is the beginning of a subject wherein Scripture commences to count the tribes now that they were all born, it hints that Reuben was not rejected on account of his deed."[11]

Ramban does see the second part of the verse as relating to the first, not to mitigate the seriousness of Reuben's sin, but rather to stress Jacob's mild reaction at the time, which was preferable in his eyes to manifesting a full-blown negative reaction, which would have led to alienation and the breakup of the family. There would be plenty of time to express his displeasure at a later stage, which is in fact what he did in his parting words (Gen. 49:4).

Of course Ramban is not alone in taking the verses literally. So do Radak and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor in their commentaries to Genesis 35:22. The latter points out that as a result of Reuben's misdeeds, Jacob lost two wives almost simultaneously. Just as David never resumed relations with the concubines that Absalom had taken, so did Jacob not maintain a sexual relationship with Bilhah. Bekhor Shor utilizes this idea to explain the juxtaposition of the list of the twelve tribes which follows upon the story of Reuben's misdeed, as if to say that in spite of losing two wives, Jacob had accomplished one of his missions in life, which was to establish twelve tribes, since the last of them had now been born. That the Mishnah itself took the verse literally and apparently

considered the breach to be of a very serious nature, in accordance with the view of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, is reflected in Mishnah *Megillah* 4:10 which enumerates the phrases which are read but not translated in the public Torah readings, where it is stated: The story of Reuben is read, but not translated.

Ramban's willingness to criticize Reuben was not a one-time occurrence. For example, with respect to Abraham's descent to Egypt, when Abraham says: *Please say that you are my sister, so that it may be well with me for your sake, and so that my soul may live because of you* (Gen. 12:10), Ramban explains: "Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children."[12]

Similarly, with respect to the verse in which Abraham empowers Sarah to (mis)treat Hagar, when he says: *Behold, your maid is in your hand; do to her that which is good in your eyes* (Gen. 16:6), Ramban comments: "Our mother did transgress by this affliction, and Abraham also by his permitting her to do so. And so, God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild-ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction."[13]

On the basis of Ramban and other medieval commentators, Tosfot Yom Tov adopts the eye-level approach, as may be seen from the following passages from his commentary on the Mishnah: Permission is granted to interpret biblical verses however we wish, as we see with our own eyes the works of the commentators from the time of the Talmud.[14]

There are also sources which support the superior-beings approach. For example, the Zohar (*Behaalotcha* 152a) states that the entire Torah is composed of sublime events and celestial secrets. In other words, we cannot understand the logic of the Torah, and we certainly cannot criticize the actions of its characters. Abraham is said to have been tried with ten trials. Maharal

(Judah Loew ben Bezalel, 1520-1609) explains that the patriarchs are not natural human beings, but rather Godly human beings. The Hebrew word for trial (*nisayon*) derives from the Hebrew word for miracle (*nes*), since a normal person would not be able to withstand the trials, each of which was as emotionally challenging as sacrificing one's own son.[15]

THE VIEW OF RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH

With regard to Abraham's possibly sacrificing Sarah's honor in order to save his own life, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch stresses that we are not to be embarrassed even if Abraham does not meet the standards that we have set for him. He explains, "The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors, and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives a stamp of veracity to what it relates . . . Take for instance Moses' modesty (Num. 12:3). Did we not know that he could also fly into a passion, his meekness and modesty would seem to us to be his inborn natural disposition, and lost as an example. Just his "*Hear now you rebels*" (Num. 20:10) gives his modesty its true greatness, shows it to us as the result of a great work of self control and self ennoblement which we all should copy because we all could copy."[16]

The overwhelming majority of the commentators are of the opinion that, at all costs, it was imperative to prevent Sarah from being morally contaminated. The only question is whether Abraham acted properly in achieving this outcome. Ramban on Genesis 12:10 wrote that Sarah's chastity would have been best protected by remaining in Canaan. He strongly criticizes Abraham's behavior. After God's command to settle in the Promised Land, Abraham was not justified in leaving it on his own initiative. Nor was it proper to expose his wife to a morally dangerous situation because of his fear for his own life.

Rabbi Hirsch disagrees with Ramban and says that it would have been prohibited for Abraham to take upon himself to remain in the hunger-stricken land, since one should not rely upon miracles. God Himself apparently expected Abraham to leave the land, since one of the ten tests of faith that Abraham underwent was to see whether he would not question God's infallibility, after being commanded to relocate his entire family to the land of Canaan and then shortly afterward being forced to leave because of famine.[17]

Rabbi Hirsch states that in the ancient world the position of a single woman with a male escort was infinitely better than that of a married woman. In the

latter situation, the husband would be disposed of, and with no one to protect her, the widow would be defenseless. When Abraham said, *and they will kill me, but you they will keep alive* (Gen. 12:12) the words "*keep alive*" were a euphemism: Were they to kill you, that would be superior to the life of disgrace that would be imposed upon you.

By playing the doting brother, Abraham was able to act as a tough negotiator to ensure that his asking price at every stage was greater than what his interlocutors could afford. In doing so, he was buying time, with the hope that the famine would end before a deal was reached, and by then Abraham and Sarah would be safely on their journey back to the land of Canaan.

What was Rabbi Hirsch's attitude toward the question of whether biblical figures may be criticized? Clearly, he does not accept the view of some religious people that the characters that appear in the book of Genesis – especially our patriarchs and matriarchs – are superhuman beings whose motives and actions cannot be judged by mere mortals. In fact, he says exactly the opposite, since he claims that only as a result of Scripture pointing out their faults and foibles, do biblical stories attain a degree of credibility and relevance to our lives. The question that remains is whether we are free to criticize the behavior of the patriarchs even when Scripture portrays their behavior without comment.

One approach is to say that Rabbi Hirsch accepts the criticism expressed by the simple meaning of the Bible, such as in the story of David and Bathsheba, where the entire chapter 12 in the book of Samuel is devoted to the rebuke of David by Nathan the prophet. However, if no explicit criticism is leveled, such as in the story of Abraham and Sarah, we must assume that our forefathers acted appropriately, and their behavior provides an ethical standard. This view of Rabbi Hirsch's approach is re-enforced by the fact that he offers the example of Moses, whom Scripture openly criticized, rather than the potentially questionable behavior of any of the other patriarchs, such as Jacob's commercial interactions with Laban, which Scripture describes without comment.

Another approach is to say that Rabbi Hirsch would allow criticism even where the Bible proffers none. The proof would be from the fact that he stated that he would have willingly accepted the negative view of Ramban concerning Abraham's deeds had he not had a satisfactory alternative explanation.

CONCLUSION

Rabbi Hirsch obviously accepts the divinity of the Bible, yet he does not feel that its intention was to whitewash the faults of its characters. As he himself states: "The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect, it deifies no man, says of none 'here you have the ideal, in this man the divine became human' . . . The Torah is no collection of examples of saints. It relates what occurred, not because it was exemplary, but because it did occur."[18]

Therefore, exegetical acrobatics to neutralize the criticism of biblical figures expressed in the Bible itself are superfluous. With regard to behavior described without comment, Rabbi Hirsch clearly makes every effort to understand it and use it as a basis for the prescribed behavior of future generations, as may be seen from his treatment of Abraham's behavior with respect to Sarah. Only if all efforts at justification prove to be futile would he adopt the approach of Ramban and openly criticize one of the patriarchs, since, as he states: "Truth is the seal of our Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers."[19]

This approach preserves respect for the Bible and its heroes, yet also accepts that they could have at times made mistakes. We are able to learn from the lives of these heroes of the Bible, not only from their successes, but from their failures as well.

NOTES

1. An interesting example of the second type is the story about the portrait of Moses, which tells of a king who ordered a portrait of Moses, which was interpreted by physiognomists to represent the likeness of a very evil person. When confronted with this analysis, Moses is said to have replied that it was indeed accurate, and he had worked hard to improve his character. There is certainly no biblical source for this story, so it belongs to the second type. The only question is whether it is even complimentary to Moses. Professor Sid Leiman has shown that chassidic masters, who stress the importance of self-improvement, have treasured the anecdote (although R. Israel Lipshutz who included it in his commentary on the Mishnah, Tiferet Yisrael, was not a chassid). See, Sid Leiman, "The Portrait of Moses," *Tradition* 24:4, Summer 1989. On the other hand, non-chassidic rabbis have preferred what they considered to be more laudatory legends which state that Moses was born circumcised, or with prophetic powers, implying that he was righteous from birth. See, TB *Sotah* 12a. Another view in the Talmud claims that the house was filled with light when Moses was born, and bases it on the biblical phrase: *And she saw that he was good* (Ex. 2:2).

2. R. Yehoshua Rice, *Hi Sichati* (Alon Shvut: Maggid Press, 2013), p. 36.

3. TB *Kritot* 11a, TB *Sanhedrin* 64b. The idiom referred to appears in 18 places in the Babylonian Talmud.
4. *Hi Sichati*, p. 21.
5. Dr. Gilad Sasson, *Poked Avon Avot – Yachasam shel Chazal le-Chataei ha-Avot*, M.A. thesis (Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2001).
6. *Hi Sichati*, p. 38.
7. TB *Sanhedrin* 56a.
8. Shottenstein edition, TB *Shabbat* 55b, note 20.
9. R. Chanoch Gebhart, *Shiurim be-Aagadot Chazal*, Shabbat, part 1, (Modiin Illit: 2001), pp. 335-336.
10. For example: guilty, disgrace, and in particular the Hebrew word for fornication – *zanita*.
11. Charles Chavel, *Ramban: Genesis*, (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), p. 430.
12. Charles Chavel, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174.
13. Charles Chavel, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
14. Tosfot Yom Tov, Mishnah *Nazir* 5:5, quoted by R. Shlomo Riskin, "Confessions of a Bible Commentator," (Efrat: Ohr Torah Institutions, 1997).
15. Maharal, *Derech Chaim ha-Shalem* on *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:4, p. 222.
16. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Genesis* 12:10-13, translated by Isaac Levy (New York: Judaica Press, 1971).
17. *Tanhuma*, Lekh Lekha 5.
18. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *op. cit.*
19. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *op. cit.*