

## BOOK REVIEW

James Kugel, *How To Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then & Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007). Reviewed by Alan T. Levenson.

Bible scholarship which is both modern and Jewish assumes that objective, academic inquiry can deepen our appreciation of the Torah. While recognizing that "Bible scholarship" and "Bible study" may have different agendas, procedures and venues, figures from the Haskalah to the present have held that once relieved of its biases, all modes of biblical analysis may be applied to Torah fruitfully. This conviction has united a very diverse body of translators, commentators, essayists and writers who undertook biblical scholarship from a consciously Jewish standpoint. This "school" has made the modern Jewish Bible an important vehicle of Jewish religious, national and ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup>

To take two brief examples, while earlier generations of self-consciously Orthodox scholars considered academic Bible scholarship too tainted with anti-Jewish and anti-religious bias to be successfully integrated into a conception of Torah, our generation has seen the application of Source Criticism, archaeology, and comparative Ancient Near East philology within a "Torah from Heaven" context. In America, two popular *humashim*, W. Gunther Plaut (ed.), *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, and David Lieber (ed.), *Etz Hayim*, integrate traditional Jewish commentary and academic findings in the context of producing a book used principally for devotional purposes. If forced to choose one illustration of this two-hundred year tradition, I would cite the Jewish Publication Society *Torah Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy* (1989-1996), which juxtaposes cutting edge biblical studies and indigenous Jewish commentary, two interpretive worlds previously sequestered from one another.

The elevation of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish modernity has had the salutary effect of giving modern Jewry a "secondary canon," transcending palpable differences in praxis and belief. Wherever one stands in the spectrum of Jewish engagement, talking about texts comes naturally. The State of Israel's founding generation elevated the Bible as a patent of national legitimacy, and as a linchpin for national identity, through instituting National Bible quizzes,

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Prime Ministerial Bible study group, and granting Tanakh extraordinary prominence in Israeli public school curricula. That perennial gadfly, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, complained about the "bibliolatry" of David Ben-Gurion and like-minded secular Zionists:

Current attempts to identify Judaism with the Hebrew Bible, which is presented as proclaiming values, ideals and a vision that "shine with their own light" are unrelated to the *Halakhah* and are independent of it. This kind of bibliolatry is Lutheran, not Jewish. Historically, Israel never lived or intended to live by Scripture, nor was it ever intended to live so religiously. Israel conducted its life in accordance with the *Halakhah* as propounded in the oral law. From the viewpoint of human values, the above identification overrates the importance of the Bible. As instruments of moral education, Sophocles' *Antigone* or Kant's *Grundlegung* are possibly superior. As philosophy, the Bible's importance cannot compare to that of Plato, or, again, Kant. Regarded as poetry, Sophocles or Shakespeare may surpass it. As history, Thucydides is certainly more interesting and profound. Only as the word of the living God is the Bible incommensurable with Sophocles and Shakespeare, Plato and Kant, Thucydides or any other work of man. But what way have I of knowing that these twenty-four books are Holy Scripture other than through the *Halakhah* which canonized them?<sup>2</sup>

Leibowitz's critique found little echo in Israel; his own sister Nehama demonstrated a method of simultaneously reading the Bible rigorously and through the eyes of the Jewish tradition. Contrary to Yeshayahu Leibowitz's rhetorical question, bibliocentrism need not be bibliolatry, need not be Lutheran, and need not come at the expense of halakhic fidelity.

Case closed – until reopened by the eminent Professor James Kugel, author of numerous wonderful volumes on the Bible, biblical exegesis and Judaism. In *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture; Then and Now* (2007), Kugel rejects the attempt to critically analyze the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern text in its historical perspective and simultaneously expect that inquiry to yield religious-ethical messages to the contemporary reader – Jewish or Christian. Kugel spends 800+ pages explaining this gap, taking many central chapters from most of the books of the Hebrew Bible and exposing them to

both traditionally religious and contemporary critical methods of analysis. For instance, chapter two deals with the loss of immortality as it appeared to the ancient interpreters, and then as it appears to modern critical Bible scholarship, with due attention to "P" and "J" versions and hunter gatherers versus farmers. Chapter three explains the fragmented story of Cain and Abel, first as an ancient meditation on the proclivity to human evil (pp. 60-62) and then as a modern etiological explanation of the prominent role of the Kenites (pp. 63-66). Chapter four focuses on the degree of Noah's righteousness (pp. 70-73), then turns to the analogues of the Genesis flood narrative in the Ancient Near East (pp. 74-79). Kugel sometimes flips this order, and occasionally gives greater play to the ancient interpreters, but generally follows chronology and explicates modern critical scholarship at greater length. (In fairness, Kugel has devoted an entire volume to these ancient testimonies, *The Bible As It Was*.) A casual reader might suppose that Kugel intends merely to juxtapose two different approaches – ancient and modern. In fact, Kugel argues a simple but powerful thesis, spelled-out most clearly in the first and final chapters: the scrolls of the Ancient Near East that were preserved and canonized were not "the Bible" at all (see pp. 8-10, 28-29, 40-45, 79-80, 360, and 679-682). Rather, the Bible as we know it emerged as the result of a group of early interpreters working from approximately 300 BCE to 200 CE, who invested those texts with a special significance that they did not previously possess, and who laid down the basic lines of interpreting those texts which remained fundamentally unchallenged until the Enlightenment. Kugel concludes: "My own view, therefore – though others may disagree – is that modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism are and must always remain completely irreconcilable" (p. 681).

Kugel's "early interpreters," diverse in terms of place, language and belief, were the true creators of the Bible. Kugel uses the term "early interpreters" deliberately to include apocryphal works, pseudepigrapha, texts from the Judean desert (i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls), Jewish authors who did not remain part of Jewish literary tradition (e.g., Philo and Josephus), early Christian texts and more. The "early interpreters" successfully carried out an "interpretive revolution" that transformed an ancient anthology into Scripture, writ large. Kugel freely admits that the chain of interpreting the Bible began in the Bible itself, most especially with the Chronicler, and he is no historical min-

imalist (p. 704, n. 8). Kugel, whose first book dealt with biblical poetry, acknowledges that selected biblical texts go back to 1000 BCE, if not further. Yet it was the "early interpreters" who made the Bible the Bible by treating it as: eternal (hence, "presentist," always relevant to contemporary concerns), coherent-harmonious, divinely given, and possessed of an esoteric meaning that required interpretation (pp. 14-16). Kugel calls these ideas "the four assumptions." Naturally, this perspective or "reading strategy" both drove the process of canonization and drew additional impulse from the creation of that canon. But Kugel insists that this mode of reading, practiced by rabbinic Judaism, early Christianity and many non-canonical texts, was not inherent in Scripture. For Kugel, neither "Written Torah" nor "Oral Torah" is what the famous opening of Mishnah *Avot* 1:1 claims: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua . . ." One can have modern biblical scholarship or the traditional Bible of Judaism and Christianity, but not both.

Historical-critical inquiry cannot uncover "the true Bible" as nineteenth-century Protestant scholars had hoped, because ancient Israel had no Bible in the sense that we understand that word. Rather, the application of Ancient Near Eastern texts in a comparative spirit by the modern scholar yields a slew of etiological tales, local concerns (geographic, philological, political), and an ancient sense of often not-very-morally-elevating insider texts, produced, as Spinoza insisted, for one people, in one place and one time. Judaism has been defined by the rabbinic tradition, but that rabbinic tradition was just one of many competing understandings of the Hebrew Bible. Although the activity of the Sages overlapped a broader group of "early interpreters," only the former created Judaism. Kugel suggests that at the beginning of normative Judaism and Christianity, "the Bible" meant different things to different groups and probably had done so for quite some time. Does the Hebrew Bible, then, have meaning for Judaism? Yes, says Kugel, but that meaning stems from belief that Torah teaches "service of God." In Kugel's own words, "To put the matter in, I admit, rather shocking terms: since in Judaism it is not the words of Scripture themselves that are ultimately supreme, but the service of God (the "standing up close") that they enjoin, then to suggest that everything hangs on Scripture might well be described as a form of fetishism or idolatry, that is a mistaking of the message for its Sender and the turning of its words into idols of wood or stone" (p. 685). Israelite religion and Juda-

ism constitute two different, albeit related, religious systems. To take one example, Kugel rejects the passionate argument of his former Harvard University colleague, Jon D. Levenson, that the recitation of the *Shema* constitutes a covenant renewal ceremony. Kugel points out that recitation of the *Shema* is not attested in pre-rabbinic texts, nor are the three paragraphs of this rabbinic liturgy connected to each other anywhere prior to the Mishnah.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not his work has struck a nerve in the wider world of Bible scholarship, Kugel's Jewish readers have certainly paid attention. Lengthy reviews have appeared in *Haaretz* (October 2010), *Commentary* (December 2007), and the *New York Times* (December 2007). The *Jewish Quarterly Review* (100:1, Winter 2010) devoted the better part of an issue to this work. William Kolbrener, a professor of literature at Bar Ilan University, adduces Milton's variegated style in *Paradise Lost* as an argument for agnosticism regarding Source Criticism (J,E,P,D), which Kugel, along with virtually every professional Bible scholar, accepts. Kolbrener maintains that Kugel writes as if the nineteenth-century historicist goal of "telling it as it really was" culminated with Hermann Gunkel's discovery of the role of etiologies in the 1920s. Kolbrener considers Kugel's atomistic approach flawed, since such criticism cannot "take us in to the heart of that which it is the interpretation" (Clifford Geertz's famous dictum). In Kolbrener's view, Kugel does not appreciate just how clearly he has chosen sides: Jewish and Christian exegetes get to keep the Bible's meaning, but they must surrender the true character of biblical literature to modern academic scholars. In this reviewer's opinion, Kugel responds only in part to Kolbrener's complaint: "He doesn't seem to think that archaeological evidence, Assyriology, Egyptology, Ancient Near Eastern history and comparative Semitics need to play any decisive role in our attempt to understand the meaning of biblical texts. But it is precisely these things that *must* mediate any serious, critical engagement with the Bible today." Please note the word that Kugel italicizes; I would prefer to italicize the next word in this sentence. While these data ought to *mediate* our engagement with the Bible, it seems to me, and I believe Kolbrener would agree, that Kugel actually means *determine*, not *mediate*. But one need not be a postmodernist to treat the received text as possessing integrity: the New Literary critics were calling for this approach in the 1930s-1940s, as do James Muilenberg (Protestant) and Robert Alter (Jewish), to name two prom-

inent literary readers of the received text who are opponents of post-modernism.

John C. Reeves, who teaches Bible at UNC Charlotte, criticizes Kugel on different grounds. For Reeves, Kugel does not go far enough in terms of problematizing the Masoretic Text – "there is no such thing as the Bible," Reeves writes, as if acknowledging textual variants of MT, the antiquity of Greek and Aramaic versions, and the Dead Sea Scrolls would necessarily lead to this conclusion. Given the list of topics at the Society of Biblical Literature, Reeves' call for ending intellectual isolationism of the field seems odd, as does his view that Kugel's book will "win accolades" by those sympathetic to "faith-based reasoning." On the contrary, I consider this book a brave gesture for someone living in the epicenter of the Jewish world (Jerusalem), and teaching at Israel's premier Orthodox university.

Benjamin Sommer, a leading proponent of Jewish Bible theology, recognizes Kugel's claims as a challenge: if the Bible did not intend to teach moral-religious lessons, it would seem as pointless to draw up a theology based on these texts as from the Gilgamesh Epic. Indeed, on his website ([jameskugel.com](http://jameskugel.com), especially in "Appendix 1: Apologetics and Biblical Criticism Lite"), Kugel makes precisely this argument. The Flood, despite disclaimers, seems no more "moral" than its Ancient Near Eastern counterparts; Jacob's trickery does not seem deplorable in the biblical Narrator's eyes, only in those of later Jewish and Christian interpreters. Now Sommer is an interested party (*noge'a ba-davar*) in this matter, but so are most modern Jews, including Kugel, who implicitly rejects the centrality of the Hebrew Bible since the Haskalah, as well as the marriage of Bible scholarship and Bible study. Sommer responds, via Abraham Joshua Heschel and Franz Rosenzweig, by insisting that from Sinai forward, interpretation played a maximal role and revelation a minimal one in Jewish intellectual history. Innovative reading (*hiddush*), not original intent, constitutes the glory of Jewish thought. Sommer concludes that *How to Read the Bible* undermines the importance of the history of biblical interpretation that Kugel himself argued for and modeled so successfully in his distinguished career.

All three critics believe that Kugel presents a reductionist view of modern biblical scholarship. Having surveyed these objections, I would like to add

one of my own to Kugel's approach, which I consider to be a dead end for the modern Jewish Bible reader.

Let us return to his central question: how did the Bible become the Bible? Canonical criticism assumes that texts in the ancient world existed only within a religiously covenanted community. The development of these texts was highly self-referential. As texts were recognized as sacred, they were imputed to be of divine origin, and vice versa. In the formulation of Brevard Childs, who pioneered this mode of criticism, words assumed to be Torah were attributed to Moses, and words attributed to Moses were assumed to be Torah. There is no evidence for either a secular authorship or a secular readership in Ancient Israel; works which posit either, *The Book of J* leaps to mind, are better described as solipsistic rather than scholarly. (Ironically, the secular Jew Harold Bloom asserts the artistic greatness of the Hebrew Bible, while the Orthodox Jew James Kugel denigrates it.) As Nahum Sarna insisted in his many scholarly contributions, the very preservation of those texts which became the Bible cannot be serendipitous. These texts, for whatever reason, were accorded greater sanctity than the "Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Num. 21:14) or the "Book of the Upright" (Josh. 10:13) or the many other named but now lost books mentioned in what eventually became the Tanakh. The gist of canonical criticism, then, runs counter to Kugel, which he dismisses rather than refutes (p. 768, notes 37-38). Even if Second Temple developments and canonization enabled the successful monopolization of the "four assumptions," that does not imply that even earlier interpreters regarded the texts as non-binding. At least one biblical passage, Daniel 9 and its interpretation of the seventy-year desolation utterance of Jeremiah 25, suggests that by the mid-second century BCE even prophets could be taken as Scripture, in exactly the sense of Kugel's "early interpreters," that is, cryptic, presentist, consistent and divine. Kugel assumes that biblical texts were merely etiology; the majority of modern Bible scholars assume the biblical texts meant to teach religio-ethical lessons. I contend that the burden of proof lies with Kugel; both because his is the minority opinion, no small matter in Judaism, and also because everyone agrees that Kugel's "early interpreters" were followed by "later interpreters" who shared their perspective.

But suppose one could ratchet up the level of argument for treating ancient Israelite texts as Scripture by demonstrating that later biblical texts constantly

reworked earlier ones, tweaked them, changed their theological kerygma, and accepted those texts as in some sense binding. Several scholars have done just this, including Samuel Sandmel, Nahum Sarna, Michael Fishbane and Bernard Levinson.<sup>4</sup> In a review of Fishbane's *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, the first proof of what predecessors had already termed "inner-biblical interpretation," Kugel reacted suspiciously to the former's conclusion that the basic categories of biblical exegesis were legal, narrative and prophetic. Kugel found it dubious that exactly the two main categories of rabbinic exegesis (halakhic-legal and aggadic-narrative) already existed in the Hebrew Bible. Given the incredible range of biblical interpretation from the Persian period to the Talmud, Kugel found this overlap more a product of Fishbane's retrojecting rabbinic categories onto biblical ones rather than an objective finding of facts. I do not doubt a certain ethnic motivation in Fishbane's works: he argued explicitly that modes of interpretation in rabbinic Judaism were neither handed down by God at Sinai, nor borrowed from the Greco-Roman environment, but rather, developed autochthonously by Jews through the centuries. Fishbane's position implies a degree of Jewish "ownership" over the process of the creation of Scripture. Yet the massive evidence adduced by Fishbane and other scholars who have followed in his "inner-biblical" footsteps suggests the scriptural quality of biblical texts long before Kugel's "early interpreters" entered the picture. Even if the later biblical texts share only a vague similarity to rabbinic methods of discourse – when Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18 employ Deuteronomy 24 to overturn the teaching of divine vicarious punishment of Exodus 34 – it seems forced to argue that these two prophets did not see the Bible as the Bible, whether one calls it "interpretation" or "revelation."

Canonical criticism and inner-biblical interpretation emerged in recent decades, and from a scripture-friendly perspective. Source Criticism, by contrast, caused considerable anxiety to the Jewish scholarly world for a century, engendering reactions that ranged from outright assault (David Hoffmann, Benno Jacob, Solomon Schechter) to the adoption of Source Critical methods but reversal of its conclusions (Ignaz Maybaum, Yehezkel Kaufmann), to acceptance but without Source Criticism's initial anti-Judaic animus (E.A. Speiser, R.E. Friedman).<sup>5</sup> Naturally, Kugel finds nothing remarkable about the presence of numerous contradictions in the text, because these texts were



the product of different times, places, milieus. Yet Kugel dismisses any "whole greater than the sum of its parts" argument as the fruit of Early & Later Interpreters – neither part of the Bible itself nor intentional. The Redactor did not intend the sort of nuanced intertextuality so beloved by Muilenberg, Tribble, Alter, Sternberg, Simon and other literary critics. In Kugel's view, the Redactor was motivated mainly by preserving ancient traditions. For Kugel, "Literary-Criticism Lite" constitutes an apologetic attempt to save the Bible as a sacred text without making explicit theological claims. As early as 1981, Kugel accused scholars of attempting a "deep substitution" of textuality for Divine Authorship. Taking specific aim at Erich Auerbach's celebrated description of biblical characters as "fraught with background," Kugel doubted that the Bible presented characters at all, or that the Bible was literature as most of us would understand it.<sup>6</sup> For Kugel, the Bible does not qualify as a literary masterpiece in the same league as Shakespeare, Dante or Milton. As for the presence of seemingly contradictory narratives by the Redactor (e.g., Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, or Genesis 38 in between 37 and 39, or the notorious "triplet" found in Genesis 12, 20 and 26), Kugel finds this placement more simply explained by an ancient author's unwillingness to discard traditions than by literary artistry. Kugel dismisses all attempts to read ethical messages into what were originally etiological tales:

One such instance is the narrative in which Jacob gets his brother Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of stew. For modern scholars, this is an etiological narrative designed to explain how the "younger brother," Israel came to dominate its once more powerful neighbor Edom. Yet that hardly sits well with the old idea of the Bible as a book replete with moral instruction. So, at least in a great many modern commentaries and introductions, the etiological side of things is down-played as the commentator desperately seeks to save Jacob's reputation:<sup>7</sup>

As the reader can imagine, that colon precedes a wide range of examples that either downplay Jacob's exploitation, oversell Esau's "spurning" of the birthright, or imagine a narrative standpoint that considers Jacob's behavior wanting. Kugel sarcastically dismisses all of these maneuvers as Jewish and/or Christian "apologetics." Aside from Kugel's overconfidence that national etiology exhausts the purpose of the biblical narrative, aside from his

overconfidence that he can locate the point at which this story "flips" from etiology to ethics and the "four assumptions" start operating, what if he were correct? Would not a merely etiological reading of Esau, unencumbered by hostile equations of Esau/Edom with Rome, allow us to legitimately perceive Esau as an individual deserving of sympathy? Indeed, such a reading exists at the heart of rabbinic traditions. Commenting on Esau's threat in Genesis 27:41, *Just wait for the days of mourning for my father and I will kill my brother Jacob*, Rashi insists that Esau intended to spare his father Isaac pain. Nehama Leibowitz correctly explains Rashi's atypical dogmatism with this point: "In the Torah, Esau is a human being, son of Isaac and Rebecca. Rashi is concerned with Esau the man. Like all human beings he has his good and bad sides."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, even accepting Kugel's implausible premise that the texts of ancient Israel did not intend to teach lessons, even acknowledging biblical repetition (intentional or not), why should this render the Bible off-limits for modern theologians scanning Jewish tradition for inspiration? Kugel has surely read Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchick's *The Lonely Man of Faith*, a classic of modern Jewish theology that takes the discrepancies between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 as its point of departure. Feminist literary critic Ilana Pardes reads the same chapters against each other as countertraditions concerning the role of women. Unlike Soloveitchick, Pardes accepts multiple authorship of the Torah, but she makes a remarkably similar point: the Bible reflects the disparity between the ontological status and the social role of women. Pardes has no dilemma regarding the pluriformity of the Bible's message: as a self-consciously post-modern reader, she finds the contradictions embedded in the Bible endemic to all texts. Even Richard Eliot Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible*, a highly successful summary and defense of a century's worth of Source Criticism, concludes with an assertion of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. For Friedman, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, with their vastly different perspectives on the creation process, yield a deeper vision than either the "P" or "J" texts would have yielded on their own. Kugel compartmentalizes these readings of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2; to him, the combination of these two creation narratives may succeed as devotional study (*talmud Torah*), but fails as valid Bible scholarship.

For all his remarkable erudition, Kugel's *How To Read the Bible* seems to ignore what Hobbes and Spinoza first grasped: whatever disparity exists between the Bible in the ancient world and in modernity, an indelible legacy has been created that can be bent this way or that, but never fenced off from everything else. Biblical scholarship and Bible study will continue to interact and inform each other's agenda. John Lennon might have imagined a world with "no religion," but a scholar working in the Western tradition cannot imagine a world with no Bible. Modern Jewry, certainly, has invested too much in the Bible to relegate it to being an object of antiquarian scholarship. To my mind, nobody expressed this better than the agnostic Ahad Ha-Am:

The Holy Scriptures are not immanently holy. What have men not found in the Holy Scriptures from the time of Philo until the present day? In the Holy Scriptures they all sought only the truth, each his own truth, and they all found what they sought, found it because they were compelled to, for if not, the truth would not be the truth and the Holy Scriptures would not be holy.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Immanuel* 1 (Summer 1972) pp. 3-14. Professor Uffenheimer published a three-part discussion of this issue ("Some Features of Modern Jewish Bible Research") in the opening volumes of this journal, then titled *Dor le-Dor*.
2. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 11.
3. "Kugel in JQR," in: jameskugel.com, pp. 13-14, commenting on Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).
4. On the differences between canonical criticism and inner-biblical interpretation, see Bernard Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford 1997) pp.13-17.
5. Jewish responses to Source Criticism have been reviewed in many places, including Yaacov Shavit and Mordechai Eran, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).
6. James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 1:1 (1981).
7. James Kugel, "Appendix 1: Apologetics and Biblical Criticism Lite," in: jameskugel.com, pp. 18-31.
8. Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit/Genesis* (Jerusalem, Hemed Press, n.d.) p. 284.
9. Ahad Ha-Am, "The Sacred and the Profane," *At the Crossroads*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1930) p. 138.