

JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה

**SARAH'S TREATMENT OF HAGAR (GENESIS 16):
MORALS, MESSAGES, AND MESOPOTAMIA**

**ALCOHOL AND THE FATE OF NADAB AND ABIHU:
A BIBLICAL CAUTIONARY TALE AGAINST INEBRIATION**

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BALAAM

RUTH AND ELISHA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

**SINAI UPSIDE-DOWN: THE THEOLOGICAL
MESSAGE OF A MIDRASH**

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**THE 50th ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL BIBLE
CONTEST FOR JEWISH YOUTH 5773**

BOOK REVIEW: JPS BIBLE COMMENTARY RUTH
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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

THE JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY

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SARAH'S TREATMENT OF HAGAR (GENESIS 16): MORALS, MESSAGES, AND MESOPOTAMIA

HAYYIM ANGEL

INTRODUCTION

From a *peshat* perspective, the biblical text stands at the center of our inquiry as we attempt to determine values from within the Bible. With thousands of years separating our cultural context from that of the Bible, however, it is often hard to distinguish textual messages from our own sensitivities and moral preferences.

Consider the behavior of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis chapter 16. Although Hagar was insensitive toward Sarah, Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar and Abraham's passive acquiescence create a painful tension. Does the narrative give any clues to its moral judgment of Abraham and Sarah?

In this essay we consider the opinions of the classical commentators, who relied on the biblical text and early rabbinic traditions. We then turn to ancient Near Eastern parallels to gain insight into the historical-social setting of the Torah. At all times, the biblical text must remain the anchor for interpretation.

TEXT AND MEDIEVAL COMMENTARY

Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.' And Abram heeded Sarai's request (Gen. 16:1-2).

In offering Hagar to Abraham, Sarah suggests that *perhaps I shall have a son through her*. It appears that Sarah would be responsible for Hagar's child and consider it her own. However, once Hagar became pregnant, tensions arose in the household:

So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian – after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan– and gave her to her husband Abram as his concubine. He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mis-

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tress was lowered in her esteem. And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!' (16:3-5).

Radak and Hizkuni suggest that Hagar claimed that since she would bear Abraham's child, she would become his main wife. This tormented Sarah. Following *Genesis Rabbah* (45:4), Rashi surmises that Hagar concluded that since Sarah was barren, she must have been wicked and rejected by God.

Sarah speaks angrily to Abraham and demands justice. *Genesis Rabbah* (45:5), followed by a number of commentators including Rashi and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, understands Sarah's criticism of Abraham as responding to his silence despite Hagar's taunts. R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi submits that Abraham showed additional affection toward Hagar after she became pregnant because of their bond over their shared future child. This emotional connection led Hagar to despise Sarah and made Sarah lash out at Abraham.

At any rate, Hagar behaved insensitively toward Sarah, who had no doubt been tormented by her barrenness and who may now have perceived a threat to her marriage with Abraham. Abraham allowed Sarah to do what she felt necessary: *Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.' Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her* (16:6).

Unlike the aforementioned commentators, Radak believes that Sarah was wrong to scold Abraham, who had simply followed her advice. Radak criticizes Sarah for her harsh treatment of Hagar, but justifies Abraham's acquiescence, since he needed to maintain peace with Sarah:

She tormented her and worked her harder than necessary. Perhaps she also struck and cursed her until she could no longer tolerate it and fled. In this, Sarah did not act ethically or piously . . . God did not approve of Sarah's action, as evidenced from the angel's telling Hagar, *for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering* (16:11), and blessed her for her endurance. Abraham did not prevent Sarah from oppressing Hagar, even though he disapproved, for the sake of domestic harmony. This story was written to teach people to acquire good character traits and avoid negative ones (Radak on 16:6).

In contrast to Radak, Ramban insists that both Abraham and Sarah transgressed: "Our Matriarch sinned through this oppression, and so did Abraham by allowing her to do so. God paid heed to Hagar's suffering and gave her a son who would be *a wild ass of a man* (Gen. 16:12) to oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah with all forms of harsh treatment" (Ramban on 16:6).

At first blush, one might conclude that the disagreement between Radak and Ramban over their judgment of Abraham is based on their moral sensibilities as to what a husband should do in this very difficult family conflict. However, much of their debate is textually grounded in the angel's subsequent message to Hagar:

An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, and said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she replied, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.' The angel of the Lord said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside all of his kinsmen' (Gen. 16:7-12).

Radak and Ramban derive their moral lessons from different elements of the angel's response. Radak cites God's expression of sympathy, *the Lord has paid heed to your suffering* (*onyekh*, v. 11). Since Sarah oppressed (*vate'anneha*) Hagar, the blame lies squarely on her shoulders. In contrast, Ramban believes that the key manifestation of the Torah's moral judgment is when the angel informs Hagar that Ishmael *shall be a wild ass of a man* (v. 12). Ramban interprets this statement to mean that the descendants of Ishmael will oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Since this punishment affects both Abraham and Sarah, Ramban projects the sin onto both of them.

As opposed to their analysis of chapter 16, Radak and Ramban remain silent about the parallel narrative in chapter 21, when Abraham and Sarah ban-

ished Hagar and Ishmael. In that instance, God explicitly ordered Abraham to do so: *But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him too, for he is your seed'* (Gen. 21:12-13).

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SETTING

With the discovery of ancient Near Eastern documents during the nineteenth- twentieth centuries, scholars found a wealth of information relevant to understanding the setting of the Bible. However, scholars debate how much to apply the various findings to the biblical text.

In his analysis of Genesis 16, Rabbi Elhanan Samet quotes several Near Eastern documents to vindicate the behavior of Abraham and Sarah. They were acting within the moral and legal conventions of their day¹:

Laqipum has married Hatala, daughter of Enishru . . . If within two years she does not provide him with offspring, she herself will purchase a slave woman, and later on, after she has produced a child by him, he may then dispose of her by sale wheresoever he pleases . . . (Mesopotamian Marriage Contract, c. 19th century BCE).²

Hagar functioned legally as a surrogate who could be disposed of once she had borne a child. After she became pregnant, however, Hagar asserted her freedom.³

Responding to Hagar's efforts to break free, Sarah reasserted her mastery over Hagar – something perfectly acceptable according to the Code of Hammurabi:

When a seignior married a hierodule and she gave a female slave to her husband and she has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves (Code of Hammurabi, 18th century BCE, #146).⁴

R. Samet cites other examples in the Torah where *innu'i* refers to enslavement rather than physical torture.⁵ Hagar chose to flee rather than accept her original legal standing as a slave.⁶ Supporting Sarah's behavior, the angel referred to Hagar as *slave of Sarai* and ordered Hagar to return and submit to [Sarah's] *harsh treatment (hitani; 16:8-9)*. Hizkuni further observes

that Hagar herself refers to Sarah as *my mistress* (v. 8), acknowledging her continued legal status as Sarah's slave. With God supporting the reenslavement (*innu'i*) of Hagar, the criticisms of Radak and Ramban fall away. This verse demonstrates that the Torah does not criticize Abraham or Sarah.

R. Samet turns to the angel's prediction that Ishmael *shall be a wild ass of a man* (v. 12). Several commentators, including Ramban cited above, interpret this expression as a negative forecast regarding Ishmael's descendants. They would become wild, uncivilized criminals who would oppress the people of Israel (see, for example, Rashi and Ramban). However, R. Samet correctly observes that the angel's prediction appears in the context of several divine blessings. He therefore adopts the interpretation of Ibn Ezra and S. D. Luzzatto, who insist that *a wild ass of a man* is also a blessing – Ishmael and his descendants would be free. Thus, the angel ordered Hagar to resume her rightful legal status as Sarah's slave, but promised her that her descendants would be free and become a great nation.

Although R. Samet's arguments appear well-supported by the text and ancient Near Eastern codes,⁷ Professor Nehama Leibowitz strenuously objects to his line of interpretation. She insists that the Torah distinguishes itself from the Code of Hammurabi: "The Torah is not interested in noting Abraham's conformity to contemporary custom. On the contrary, it is concerned with drawing attention to the unique contribution and character of the Patriarch. Were merely a contemporary local usage involved, why should the Torah dwell at such length on it?" (p. 154).

Prof. Leibowitz favors Radak and Ramban as having the proper textual and moral reading of the narrative. The Torah is being critical of Sarah and Abraham, based on the sympathetic treatment of Hagar for her oppression (*innu'i*; v. 11). It is noteworthy that Prof. Leibowitz generally avoided the use of ancient Near Eastern sources in her *Studies*. She was evidently concerned that benefits derived from such inquiry could be neutralized by the religious dangers inherent in considering a divine text against human-authored parallels.⁸ In this instance, she cited the Code of Hammurabi precisely to insist that the Torah's morality is superior to that of its historical-legal setting.

Prof. Leibowitz levels a powerful question against R. Samet's thesis, since God is sympathetic to Hagar's *innu'i* (v. 11). R. Samet responds that God's

sympathy toward Hagar's *innu'i* does not refer to Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar but rather to Hagar's suffering in the wilderness. However, the use of a form of the word *innu'i* in both instances points to a fundamental shortcoming in R. Samet's analysis.

On the other hand, R. Samet's argument that the angel supported the legal status of Hagar as a slave is a powerful blow to Prof. Leibowitz's analysis. Each side has a compelling textual argument against the other.

CONCLUSION: RESOLVING THE TENSION

One can offer an interpretation that combines the best elements of both readings. The ancient codes are relevant to explain the conventions that Sarah and Hagar followed. Since there were clear legal standards, Hagar breached them by asserting freedom, and Sarah acted within her rights to reassert Hagar's servitude. Therefore, the angel ordered Hagar to return to her legal servitude and called her *slave of Sarai*. In this regard, R. Samet's analysis is textually sound, and the Torah appears to vindicate the behavior of Abraham and Sarah.

Simultaneously, Prof. Leibowitz is correct when she maintains that the Torah offers a sympathetic treatment of Hagar, including the poignant comment of the angel that God responded to Hagar's *innu'i* and blessed her that that her descendants would be free and a great nation. However, the Torah is not criticizing Sarah, who had acted legally in her context. It is critical of *the entire social context* of the Mesopotamians. While Sarah was legally correct and therefore acted morally in her context, the story remains painful at the human level. God expresses sympathy toward Hagar, indicating that the moral-legal system of that era would necessarily lead to tragic results, such as what occurred with Sarah and Hagar.

This thesis is corroborated by the later Torah legislation to help a runaway slave escape: *You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him* (Deut. 23:16-17).

Contrast this law with the Code of Hammurabi (#15-16), which prescribed death for anyone who helped a slave escape or who harbored a runaway slave. The Torah shifts its moral focus to the humanity of a slave, who is ul-

timately endowed with rights as well.⁹ The Torah's radical departure from the prevailing laws of slavery would push humanity toward a morality that would finally abolish slavery altogether.¹⁰

In highlighting Hagar's suffering and God's sympathy for her, the Torah illustrates its dissatisfaction with the morality of the ancient Near East. Through its narratives and laws, the Torah paved a moral path that would prevent the recurrence of these painful stories in the future.¹¹

NOTES

1. E. Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavu'a*, vol. 1 (first series), ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adummim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002) pp. 31-40.
2. Translation from J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 543.
3. Radak similarly suggests that Hagar began to consider herself as a full wife rather than a slave/concubine.
4. Translation from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 172. It is worth noting that some ancient legal codes also allowed physical punishment for a slave who behaved insolently: "If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her, her mouth shall be scoured with one quart of salt" (Laws of Ur-Nammu #22, Sumer, c. 22nd century BCE), translation from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 525.
5. See, for example, Exodus 1:11: *So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor (le-ma'an annoto be-sivlotam)*.
6. Rabbenu Hananel had suggested this interpretation in the eleventh century.
7. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, trans. A. Newman (Jerusalem: WZO Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, fourth revised ed., 1981) pp. 153-157.
8. See M. Ahrend, "From My Work with Nehama a'h," in *Pirkei Neḥama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*, ed. M. Ahrend, R. Ben-Meir, & G. H. Cohen (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 2001), p. 47; Y. Rozenon, "The Exegete, the Interpretation, and History: An Observation on Nehama Leibowitz's Exegetical Approach" (Hebrew), in *Al Derekh ha-Avot: Thirty Years of Herzog College*, ed. A. Bazak, S. Wygoda, & M. Monitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2001) pp. 448-449. For further discussion, see H. Angel, "The Paradox of Parshanut: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators?", review essay on *Pirkei Neḥama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume, Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004) pp. 112-128; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006) pp. 56-76.
9. See further discussion in M. Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2011) pp. 385-398.
10. On this point, see E. Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavu'a*, vol. 1 (second series), ed. A. Fishler (Ma'aleh Adummim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004) pp. 327-347.
11. For related studies of how the Torah improved on the morality of earlier Near Eastern legal codes, see, for example, M. Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," and "The Biblical Concept of Asylum," in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish

Publication Society, 1995) pp. 25-50; C. Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, trans. D. Strauss (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2008) pp. 59-77; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986-1996) pp. 158-189; M. Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant*, pp. 953-962.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

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	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 12
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 10
November	Ecclesiastes	11 – 12
	Esther	1 – 10
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January	I Chronicles	10 – 29
	II Chronicles	1 – 8
February	II Chronicles	9 – 36



ALCOHOL AND THE FATE OF NADAB AND ABIHU: A BIBLICAL CAUTIONARY TALE AGAINST INEBRIATION

ARTHUR J. WOLAK

The reason for the sudden death of Nadab and Abihu remains one of the Torah's most perplexing mysteries. The lack of specific details in Leviticus 10:1-3 and 16:1 is surprising, for not only were Nadab and Abihu the eldest of the priestly four sons of Aaron, the first High Priest, but according to tradition they were "next in importance after Moses and Aaron, ranking even higher than the seventy elders."¹ In other words, these were key figures in Israelite history. Why were they struck down? To determine exactly why is to understand the intentions of God, which is beyond man's capability. One can infer from a careful consideration of the Torah, however, that the underlying reason was the effect of alcohol consumption on human behavior.

WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.'
And Aaron was silent (Lev. 10:1-3).

These Torah verses suggest many possible inferences. The brothers each laid incense on a burning pan, which they offered as "alien fire" that God had not commanded of them. As a consequence, *fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them* (Lev. 10:2). The brothers died instantly at God's command. Aaron was silent, whether owing to shock at his loss, implicit understanding of the reasons for his loss, or simply acceptance of God's actions. To

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determine the exact nature of the infraction of Nadab and Abihu requires more probing.

Milgrom suggests that "the Nadab and Abihu account may serve as a polemic against paganism – the offering of incense in private idolatrous cults."² This is certainly a reasonable conclusion because, Milgrom explains, "the authorities feared, correctly, that it was or could lead to a heathen practice and that try as they might," possibly improper incense offerings could not be easily eliminated.³ Were these two brothers killed because they used incense in particular in this offering? Was it because they offered "alien fire" that the Lord had not asked of them? A subsequent Torah verse states, *The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord* (Lev. 16:1). This verse reiterates what happened to Nadab and Abihu, but adds *when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord*. Could it be that the brothers came too close to the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies? While this could be their main offense, it remains speculative.

In his commentary on Leviticus, Baruch Schwartz states that "two of Aaron's sons commit a blatant act of sacrilege, overstepping the strictly prescribed bounds of acceptable worship (10:1). The Lord sanctifies His name by striking them down on the spot (10:2-3), and the surviving members of the priestly family are forbidden to mourn their demise (10:4-7),"⁴ at least not outwardly. Still, it remains unclear exactly what they did wrong.

According to Schwartz, the ancient rabbis and commentators of medieval times were "incredulous at the idea that God had struck down two young priests for a 'mere' ritual offence," which appeared to come from a sincere attempt to serve God, though perhaps with excessive enthusiasm.⁵ Yet in biblical thinking, Schwartz adds, "ritual crimes are dire."⁶ Schwartz asserts that the brothers sinned because they "went too far in their misguided superpiety" and, by doing so, "acted in utter disregard for the deity." To be specific, "God intended that the manifestation of His Presence would ignite the altar fire, marking His acceptance of His people's devotion," Schwartz suggests; "their intent was for the divine fire to ignite their own pans; that is, they were attempting to arrogate control of the deity to themselves."⁷ This argument is compelling, and reflects the idea that priests were held to a par-

ticularly strict standard due to their close involvement with the rituals of the Sanctuary.

Similarly, Milgrom observes that "Priests and Levites share the custody of the sanctuary, the priests guarding within (and at the entrance, Num. 3:38) and the Levites guarding without (Num. 3:23, 29, 35)." Milgrom further notes that "All priests and Levites are responsible if disqualified priests or Levites encroach upon the sancta; Kohathite Levites are responsible for encroachment by Israelites while they carry the sancta (Num. 3:31; 4:1-15); and all Levites whose cordons ring the encamped sanctuary (Num. 3:23, 29, 35) are responsible for any Israelite encroachment." Hence, Milgrom concludes, "The penalty priests and Levites pay for failure to prevent encroachment is that of Nadab and Abihu – death by divine agency (Num. 18:3)."⁸ There can be no question that there were certain dangers associated with functioning as a priest.

RITUAL INFRACTIONS

Given the lack of a clear reason for the death of Nadab and Abihu, ancient rabbis and medieval commentators came to suggest other reasons for the severe fate of these two, Milgrom notes, including "drunkenness, celibacy, arrogant impatience for Moses and Aaron to die, or neglect of their sacred obligations."⁹ However, the simple understanding of the text seems to indicate a ritual infraction.

Regarding the behavior of Nadab and Abihu, Levine notes that the Midrash speculates that these two priests, by bringing a voluntary offering to celebrate the Tabernacle dedication, may have committed various ritual offences, such as penetrating too deeply into the innermost section of the sanctuary – which only the High Priest could do – and thereby getting too close to God; or bringing an offering they should not have brought; or because the "alien fire" they brought into the sanctuary consisted of unsanctified coals from an oven rather than the sacred coals from the sacrificial altar.¹⁰ Milgrom agrees with this view. He states: "The only possibility is that Nadab and Abihu took live coals from another source [rather than from the divine fire that consumed sacrifices on the altar]" because the term *esh zarah* ("alien fire") – as explained below – represented "unauthorized coals" rather than "flames."¹¹

Levine cites M. Haran's view that the offense of the two priests could simply have been bringing incense from beyond the sacred area – between the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and the altar – into the sacred space. The incense may not have been pure or it may not have adhered to the exact mixture prescribed in Exodus 30:34-38.¹² Levine further speculates that the two priests had violated a specific Torah law by entering the Tent for some improper purpose, because of a possible equivalence of *esh zarah* ("alien fire," Lev. 10:1) and *ketoret zarah* (an "alien incense" offering, Ex. 30:9). If these two terms are equivalent, Levine suggests, the death sentence might have come about because "it was forbidden to offer on the golden incense altar anything other than the daily incense offering."¹³ According to Exodus 30:7, the incense was offered twice daily on the inner altar; a compound of spices, it might have been improperly blended by Nadab and Abihu,¹⁴ but this again remains speculative.

There is one underlying question behind all these approaches. Why would these two presumably knowledgeable priests commit an offence, whatever it may actually have been, which deserved the punishment they received? In other words, the priests should have known better, so what could have led them to commit a serious infraction? One possible and compelling answer is lack of clear thinking due to alcohol ingestion, an act that impaired their judgment.

THE DANGER OF ALCOHOL

And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moses (Lev. 10:8-11).

These verses occur almost immediately after Nadab and Abihu's death. Why would God make such a stark pronouncement, that no wine or any other intoxicant be drunk by Aaron or his remaining sons on entering the Tent of Meeting, to avoid being killed? It seems that this warning needed clear articulation, because the law had already been violated by Nadab and Abihu.

Note also that the prohibition was communicated by God directly to Aaron, not through Moses, implying that it served as an explanation to Aaron for the death of his sons.

The need for sobriety is self-evident – priests are community leaders doing holy work. They must therefore retain a clear mind in order to perform their duties thoughtfully. If Nadab and Abihu had somehow been intoxicated, they would not have kept a clear head and might thus have committed an infraction that aroused God's anger. That infraction could have been any of those ritual offenses already mentioned. Why would these priests have done any of these things? Alcohol – a drug known to interfere with clear thinking – may indeed have been the cause, leading God to issue the warning against priestly intoxication (or drinking any alcohol at all) in Leviticus 10:8-10.

In *Leviticus Rabbah*, the Midrash alludes to alcohol in a series of references to Leviticus 10:1-3. For example: "Just as an adder separates life from death ... so wine caused a separation between Aaron and his sons in the matter of the death penalty."¹⁵ Wine is clearly understood here as the root cause of the death of Aaron's two sons. Leaving no room for doubt, "R. Shim'on expounded: The two sons of Aaron died only because they entered the Tent of Meeting when they were drunk."¹⁶

R. Pinhas in the name of R. Levi asserts that intoxication was indeed the main offense of Aaron's sons. "The matter may be compared to a king who had a reliable steward, but who observed the man standing in the doorway of a [wine] shop. He cut off his head without disclosing the reason and appointed another steward in his place. Now we do not know why he killed the first man, but from the instruction he gave to the second we can draw the proper conclusion, for he said: 'Do not enter that [wine] shop.' That tells us why he killed the first man. So here it is written, *And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them; and they died before the Lord* (Lev. 10:2)."¹⁷

The Rabbis of the Midrash understood that alcohol was the underlying problem that led to Nadab and Abihu's demise, based on the proximity of the warning against intoxication to the account of their death. "Now we do not know the reason why they were put to death. But from what the Holy One, blessed be He, told Aaron, saying to him, *Drink no wine or strong drink [you or your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, lest you die]*

(Lev. 10:8), we may draw the conclusion that they were put to death only on account of wine."¹⁸

However, in another section of *Leviticus Rabbah*, we find a different reason for the death of Aaron's sons, taught in the name of R. Eliezer: "[They] died only because they gave legal instruction in the presence of Moses, their master."¹⁹ In other words, it was a particular *action* that led to their fate. R. Eliezer states, "*I am not a prophet, nor the disciple of a prophet*" (Amos 7:14), but this is the tradition which I have received: Any [disciple] who teaches a law in his master's presence is liable to the death penalty."²⁰ Yet, one can still infer that alcohol made Nadab and Abihu act improperly – by giving instruction in the presence of Moses. The view of R. Eliezer, as well as the simple belief that it was a particular ritual offense that caused the death of Nadab and Abihu, in no way contradicts the premise that alcohol ingestion was the underlying problem. This is similar to Rambam's explanation that the sin of Moses at the Waters of Meribah was losing his temper, which gave rise to his own particular infraction.²¹

In fact, other passages in *Leviticus Rabbah* also omit any reference to alcohol, focusing instead on the brothers' actions. For example, "Bar Kappara said in the name of R. Yirmiyah b. Eleazar: On account of four matters did the two sons of Aaron die: because of drawing near [to the holy place], because of the offering [they made], because of [bringing] strange fire, and because they did not take counsel with one another."²² This is followed by specifics: "Because of drawing near: i.e., entering the Holy of Holies; Because of the offering: i.e., a sacrifice which had not been commanded; Because of the strange fire: brought in from the kitchen; Because they did not take counsel with one another, as it is written, *Nadab and Avihu each took his censer* (Lev. 10:1), i.e., each on his own account, for they did not take counsel with one another."²³

Although these are valid points, the underlying reason for the lack of clear thought in Nadab and Abihu's actions appears to have been inebriation. Alcohol interfered with their ability to behave professionally in accordance with God's expectations.

CONCLUSION

Following the violent death of Nadab and Abihu, the *kohanim* (priests)

were forbidden to consume alcohol. This also appears to be the general conclusion of the Rabbis in *Leviticus Rabbah*. Alcohol was evidently to blame for the errors Nadab and Abihu committed, which aroused God's fury. As it is said in *Leviticus Rabbah*, "Because they were drunk, and in that regard the death penalty is specified in Scripture: *Wine and strong drink you shall not drink . . . lest you die* (Lev. 10:9)."²⁴

While Jews in Israel and the Diaspora have traditionally tended not to drink to excess,²⁵ in the case of Nadab and Abihu the Sages had good reason to believe that drinking alcohol was responsible for these two men's clear lack of an appropriate frame of mind – *kavvanah* – when performing the religious duties incumbent on them in their priestly role.

As a consequence of their behavior, God made an example of the two brothers, dealing with them harshly. Moreover, just as other biblical figures serve as instruments for the sanctification of God's name through their punishment, Milgrom suggests that "here, too, the deaths of God's intimate priests, Nadab and Abihu, perform the function of sanctifying God – providing awe and respect for His power to all who witness the incident or who will subsequently learn of it."²⁶ This further serves as a warning to the priests that they must be especially careful when undertaking their duties in the sanctuary.

NOTES

I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Ruth Sandberg, Professor of Rabbinics at Gratz College, for her impressions of an earlier version of this paper.

1. Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991) p. 596.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 628.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 630. Milgrom also presents evidence that private incense offerings were widespread in ancient Israel.

4. Baruch J. Schwartz, commentary to Leviticus in A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005) p. 225.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Milgrom, p. 602.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Baruch Levine, *The JPS Commentary on Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 59.

11. Milgrom, p. 597.
12. Suggested by Dr. Ruth Sandberg (personal correspondence with the author).
13. Levine, p. 59.
14. Milgrom, p. 597.
15. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), Parashah Twelve, XII:I, 16.B, p. 282.
16. *Ibid.*, 17.A.
17. *Ibid.*, 17.B, C, D.
18. *Ibid.*, 17.E.
19. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:VI, 2.A, p. 383.
20. *Ibid.*, 2.D.
21. Maimonides, *Introduction to Avot*, chapter 4.
22. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:VIII, 1.A, p. 384.
23. *Ibid.*, 1.B., 1.C., 1.D., 1.E., 1.F.
24. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:IX, 1.B, p. 385.
25. Possibly due to evolutionary biological prevention as a result of the ADH2*2 genetic variation that has been found significantly high among members of the Jewish community. This may conceivably be traced to a cultural tendency toward reduced alcohol consumption that might even stem from such biblical prohibitions as those discussed. See: "Gene Discourages Alcoholism in Jews," <http://alcoholism.about.com/cs/genetics/a/blcah030307.htm>; "Jewish Students Less Likely to Binge," <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blsu030306.htm>; "Study: Jews Drink Less, but are More Likely to Get Drunk," http://www.jewishshaz.com/_jewish-news/990115/study.shtml.
26. Milgrom, pp. 601-2.



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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BALAAM

MOSHE ANISFELD

The purpose of this paper is to identify the psychological motives that drove Balaam to embark on a mission to curse the Israelites, given that his chances of success at the outset were very low, and which made him persevere with that mission even after it proved counterproductive.

INTRODUCTION

Balak, the king of Moab, is afraid that the approaching Israelites will fight and vanquish his kingdom. He sends representatives to Balaam, a Midianite diviner,¹ inviting him to come to Moab, curse the Israelites, and thereby help to defeat them. The Torah relates two visits by Balak's emissaries.

While the first group of emissaries waits, God reveals Himself to Balaam and forbids him to go to Moab to curse the Israelites (Num. 22:12). Balak then sends a larger and more distinguished group of emissaries to try to convince Balaam to accede to his request. God now permits Balaam to go with them, but stipulates that Balaam must do only what He commands him.

Accompanied by servants and riding on his ass, Balaam sets out with the Moabite dignitaries. God is furious with him for going and has an angel with a drawn sword block his passage. The angel tells Balaam that he may proceed with the delegates, but must say what God tells him.

Changes in God's messages to Balaam require clarification. Initially, Balaam is denied permission to go to Moab; then he is allowed to do so, but God is incensed when he sets out and has his path blocked. Thereafter, Balaam is again permitted to leave. These apparent inconsistencies can be resolved by close attention to the wording of the text. The first permission was introduced by a conditional clause: *Im li-kro lekha ba'u ha-anashim, kum lekh ittam* – 'If these men have come to call you, [you may] rise and go with them' (Num. 22:20).² This conditional phrase is superfluous: The whole purpose of the delegates was clearly to invite Balaam. The exegetes have assigned special meaning to this phrase. Rashi comments: "If this is your calling, and you expect to be paid for it . . ." Sforno similarly explains: "If they

only want to consult with you . . ." ³ Thus, the permission given for Balaam to go to Moab was for other purposes, not for cursing the Israelites, as he was categorically forbidden to do in the initial message that he received from God.

God was incensed that Balaam was going, because he set out with the intention of cursing the Israelites. The text states: *and he went with [im] the Moabite dignitaries* (Num. 22:21). Rashi explains, "In his heart was the same goal as in their hearts." Balaam was only permitted to go *ittam* (Num. 22:20), with them physically, but he went with them psychologically as well (*im*). The fact that Balaam intended to curse the Israelites is more transparent in Deuteronomy, where Moses tells the people: *'But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you'* (Deut. 23:6). Ibn Ezra makes it clear that this verse indicates that Balaam meant to curse the Israelites. Nehemiah (13:2) also states that God turned Balaam's curse into a blessing.

Finally, after blocking his path, the angel tells Balaam unconditionally: *'Go with the men'* (Num. 22:35). Rashi teaches, "Heaven leads a man down the road he wants to travel." Balaam is given every warning, but in the end he is allowed to exercise his free will and to do what he chooses.

When Balaam finally reaches Balak, he has him make burnt-offerings and then goes to obtain a message from God. On his return, Balaam delivers a poetic oracle (*mashal*) praising and blessing the Israelites. Balak is upset, but allows Balaam to deliver two more oracles, hoping that he will pronounce a curse on the Israelites. But Balaam continues to bless and praise the Israelites. After the third oracle, Balak is enraged and orders Balaam to return home. Before leaving, Balaam delivers a fourth oracle, predicting that the Israelites will defeat Moab and Edom. He also adds three brief oracles against other nations.

WHY DOES BALAAM ACCEPT THE MISSION TO CURSE THE ISRAELITES?

Given the divine message Balaam received, telling him that he would not be permitted to curse the Israelites (a message reinforced by the blocking of his path), the question that arises is why he undertook a mission doomed to failure. A close examination of the text, with the help of Rashi's comments, provides clues concerning the personal traits that motivated Balaam. Two of

the traits that Rashi attributes to Balaam are avarice and grandiosity.⁴ I will attempt to show that these traits explain why Balaam undertook the mission in the first place and why he continued to pursue it.

However, Rashi himself, while attributing these negative traits to Balaam, does not consider them responsible for his actions. Following rabbinic tradition (*Avot* 5:22), Rashi views Balaam as an evil individual (*rasha*) who attempted to harm the Israelites because he hated them (see his comments on Num. 22:5, 11, 21). However, the textual support for the notion that Balaam was motivated by hatred of the Israelites is rather weak. For example, Rashi comments that the phrase *Balaam saddled his ass* (Num. 22:21) indicates that he saddled it himself, being impatient to go because of his hatred of the Israelites. However, Ibn Ezra observes that the saddling of the ass may actually have been done by one of Balaam's servants on his order. Indeed, two servants are mentioned in the next verse (Num. 22:22) as accompanying Balaam on his journey. Even if we interpret the phrase literally to mean that Balaam did the saddling himself, because he was eager to go, it does not necessarily follow that his motive was hatred of the Israelites. He may have been motivated by his avarice and haughtiness, expecting to reap financial benefits and to gain respect.

I will now discuss the textual evidence which suggests that Balaam was avaricious and haughty.

AVARICE

In the first message from God, Balaam is told: *'Do not go with them. You must not curse that people for they are blessed'* (Num. 22:12). However, Balaam conveys to the delegates only the initial part of God's message. He tells them: *'Go back to your own country for the Lord will not let me go with you'* (Num. 22:13). When the delegates bring back Balaam's truncated message to Balak, he sends a larger and more distinguished group of dignitaries and instructs them to tell Balaam: *'Please do not refuse to come to me. I will honor you greatly* ⁵ *[ki khaved akhavedekha me'od], and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me'* (22:16-17). Balak thus gives a positive interpretation to Balaam's refusal to come: that he is playing for a greater than usual reward. That this is, indeed, on Balaam's mind is suggested by his reply to the new group of messengers: *'Though Balak were to give me*

his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God' (Num. 22:18). Rashi's comment on the first clause of the verse is: "We learn that he was greedy and coveted the money of others. He thought: Balak should really give me all the silver and gold that he has. If not for me, he would have to hire many soldiers and, even then, he would not be certain of victory. But I will certainly be victorious."

The promise of a handsome financial reward is repeated in the first and last encounters between Balak and Balaam. In both instances Balak uses forms of the euphemistic term *kavod* (honor) to refer to monetary reward. When Balak first greets Balaam, he upbraids him for not having agreed to come with the first delegation, adding: '*Am I really unable to reward you?*' [*ha-umnam lo ukhal kabdekha?*] (Num. 22:37). At their last meeting, when Balak dismisses Balaam, he adds: '*I was going to reward you richly [Amarti kated akhabedekha], but the Lord has denied you the reward*' (Num. 24:11). In his reply, Balaam repeats what he told the messengers: '*Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lord's command*' (Num. 24:13).

GRANDIOSITY

Balaam's expectation of a large reward is related to his exaggerated self-importance, as suggested by Rashi's comment on Numbers 22:18 quoted above. Balaam is in effect saying: My reward should be commensurate with my anticipated stellar performance. Rashi also finds a reflection of Balaam's arrogance in two other statements that he makes. In the visit of the first delegation, when Balaam goes to receive a message from God, we read that God asked Balaam: '*Who are these people with you?*' (Num. 22:9). Balaam answers: '*Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message*' (Num. 22:10). Rashi comments: "Though I am not important in Your eyes, I am important in the eyes of kings." The basis for Rashi's comment seems to be Balaam's choice of "Balak . . . the king" as the grammatical subject of his answer. God's question was about "these people" and Balaam's answer should therefore have been: '*They are the messengers of Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab.*' By making "Balak . . . king of Moab" the subject (and omitting any reference to the messengers), Balaam shows that he is boasting about his importance.⁶

Rashi also detects an element of vainglory in Balaam's message to the first group of delegates. He says to them: *'The Lord will not let me go with you'* (Num. 22:13). Rashi adds the implicit message: "But only with officials of higher rank than you."

BALAAM'S SELF-DECEPTION

Balaam's inflated ego and hankering after financial gain led him to behave irrationally, to fool himself into believing that he might somehow be able to curse the Israelites. There was a basis for self-deception in the three divine messages that Balaam received prior to his arrival in Moab. Of these, only the first message (Num. 22:12) explicitly forbade Balaam to curse the Israelites. The latter two messages (Num. 22:20 and 22:35) merely stated that he must do/say what God told him. Being eager to accept Balak's offer, this change made Balaam think that just as God had shifted from forbidding to allowing him to go to Moab, so He might also shift from forbidding to permitting him to curse the Israelites. The talmudic sage Rav Naḥman saw the change from the initial categorical "do-not-go" to the subsequent "go," albeit with restrictions, as indicating that chutzpah pays off even when it concerns God Almighty (TB *Sanhedrin* 105a). The point is that Balaam had grounds for believing that his (audacious) persistence might facilitate his cursing of the Israelites.

Thus, a haughty ego and a craving for money led Balaam to act irrationally when he accepted Balak's invitation to come to Moab to curse the Israelites. We can now begin to examine why it was that Balaam persisted in his mission, even after his initial failures.

THE HUMBLING OF BALAAM AFTER THE FIRST ORACLE

The consequence of Balaam's blessing the Israelites rather than cursing them in the first oracle was that he met with scorn from the Moabite leadership instead of the respect that he coveted. I will now present the textual evidence for Balaam's lowered standing at that point.

After Balaam delivers his first oracle, Balak rebukes him, saying: *'What have you done to me? I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!'* (Num. 23:11). In addition to the rebuke he receives from Balak, Balaam's loss of respect among the Moabites is also apparent from the

reduced number of notables who come to hear his second oracle. In the case of the first oracle, the text states that Balak and *all the Moabite dignitaries* awaited Balaam (Num. 23:6); but to hear the second oracle, it says that Balak and *the Moabite dignitaries* (Num. 23:17) were there, omitting the word "all." Rashi comments: "Seeing that it was hopeless, some of the dignitaries had left and now only a few remained."

Balaam's loss of respect after his first oracle is also shown by the references to him through pronouns, rather than his name, in the biblical narrative. Balaam's response to Balak's rebuke thus states: *He replied, 'I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth'* (Num. 23:12). The next verse states: *And Balak said to him . . .* (Num. 23:13). Balaam's name is also missing from the following two verses (Num. 23:14-15). The second of these reads: *And he said to Balak [Va-yomer el Balak] . . .* (Num. 23:15).

The text also highlights Balaam's diminished presence after the first oracle by leaving out any mention of his instructing Balak to build altars and make sacrifices. In the preparation for the first oracle, it states that Balaam ordered Balak to build altars and make sacrifices, and that Balak complied (Num. 23:1-2). Similarly, in the preparation for the third oracle, Balaam's order and Balak's compliance are explicitly mentioned (Num. 23:29-30). However, in the preparation for the second oracle, Balaam's order and Balak's compliance are not indicated: the text merely states that Balak built altars and made sacrifices (Num. 23:14).

Prior to the third and fourth oracles, Balaam endures more criticism from the Moabites. After he pronounces the second oracle, Balak tells him: *'Neither curse nor bless them!'* (Num. 23:25). After the third oracle, Balak is furious with Balaam and says to him: *'I called you to damn my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times!'* (Num. 24:10). Balak then orders Balaam to leave at once (Num. 24:11).

Balaam's oracles blessing the Israelites subjected him to criticism and insults from the Moabites. Their negative reaction was already evident after the first oracle, yet Balaam went on to pronounce further oracles blessing Israel.

BALAAAM'S ASSERTIVENESS AND RETALIATION

It should have been clear to Balaam that he was not permitted to curse the Israelites and that his quest for honor and reward was being frustrated. Why

did he not simply abandon the mission? My proposal is that Balaam continued to bless the Israelites after the first oracle so as to aggravate the Moabites in retaliation for their insults to his haughty ego. In fact, he explicitly demands respect. In his introduction to the second oracle, he talks down to Balak, saying: '*Up, Balak, attend. Give ear to me, son of Zippor!*' (Num. 23:18).

In the third and fourth oracles, Balaam's assertiveness is present in full force. As Milgrom comments, "The third and fourth times, casting divination aside, he rises to the level of prophecy. Needing no dictation from God, but flooded by His spirit, he composes his own utterance (*ne'um*) of blessing (24:1-2)." By speaking in his own voice in these oracles, Balaam projects his self-confidence. His enhanced presence is indicated in the narrative by the mention of his name in every verse preceding the third and fourth oracles (Num. 23:26, 27, 28, 29, and 30; 24:1 and 2).

In his introductions to the third and fourth oracles, Balaam identifies himself proudly. In the introduction to the third oracle, he says: '*Word of Balaam son of Beor, Word of the man whose eye is true, Word of him who hears God's speech, Who beholds visions from the Almighty, Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled*' (24:3-4). And in the introduction to the fourth oracle (Num. 24:15-16) he adds one more self-attribute: '*Who obtains knowledge from the Most High*' (Num. 24:16). This elaborate self-glorification contrasts starkly with the first oracle, where he did not even mention his own name. At that point, before the humiliations to which he was subjected, he had no need to assert himself. Back then, he felt that he had received due respect. Balak's initial invitation has the messengers flatter Balaam by telling him in the name of Balak: '*. . . I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed*' (Num. 22:6). Furthermore, upon Balaam's arrival in Moab, Balak sends him a feast of oxen and sheep (Num. 22:40), to "feed" his exalted pride (Sforno). Balaam only demands respect after the first oracle, when he was humiliated and felt a need to assert himself.

Balaam also endeavored to restore his reputation as one able to contribute to the inflicting of harm. Immediately following the Balaam story (Num. 25:1-9), there is an account of Israelite men consorting with Moabite and Midianite women who induced them to worship their idol, Baal-Peor. This brought about a plague in which 24,000 Israelites perished (Num. 25:9). Later, it is stated that the harlotry and idol worship took place on Balaam's ad-

vice (Num. 31:16). I assume that Balaam did this to prove to the Moabites – and to himself – that he still retained the ability to produce results, one way or another.

SUMMARY

This paper has analyzed subtle aspects of the wording in the Balaam story to uncover the psychological subtext of his behavior. It suggests that Balaam had a grandiose feeling of self-importance and a lust for financial gain which drove him to undertake a mission to curse the Israelites, despite clear indications that the mission would fail. In his first oracle, Balaam blesses the Israelites instead of cursing them. This arouses the anger and scorn of the Moabites. Yet Balaam does not terminate his mission after the initial dismal results and its aftereffects. Instead, he reacts defiantly, asserting his superiority and producing three more major oracles of praise and blessing for the Israelites and damnation of their enemies. I propose that he does so in retaliation for the Moabite affronts to his ego.

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NOTES

1. Joshua 13:22 refers to him as a *kosem*. See J. Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) pp. 471-473.
2. This is the writer's literal translation of the Hebrew.
3. These and other English renderings of commentaries incorporate the translations of M. Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011).
4. On the basis of *Avot* 5:23, which states that the disciples of Balaam were characterized by an evil eye, haughtiness, and avarice, Rashi (Num. 24:2) declares that Balaam intended to cast an evil eye on the Israelites. However, the textual support for an evil eye is rather weak.
5. This is the literal translation of the Hebrew. The NJPS renders the phrase as "I will reward you richly," which is indeed what the phrase says euphemistically, as does the English term "honorarium" (Milgrom, *ibid*, Num. 22:17). In general, I use the NJPS translation, without noting minor changes that I have made, in order not to burden the reader.
6. The explanation of Eliyahu Mizraḥi (in *Otzar Mefarshai Rashi al ha-Torah*, Jerusalem: H. Wagshal, n.d., Num. 22:10) gives as a basis for Rashi's comment the fact that Balaam need not have identified Balak as the "king of Moab." This is a possible explanation, but I think that if it were the sole basis for Rashi's comment, he would have made it on the words "king of Moab" rather than on the whole phrase, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab." Moreover, Balak needs to

be identified as the king of Moab, since only a ruler like Balak can ask Balaam curse the Israelites.

7. Milgrom, *ibid.*, p. 473.



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RUTH AND ELISHA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

RUTH WALFISH

In this brief article I will compare two biblical characters, Ruth and Elisha. On the face of it they seem to have little in common, yet it is my contention that the Bible purposely connects these two thematically.¹ A study of these characters also necessitates an analysis of the two people most significant in their lives: Naomi on the one hand and Elijah on the other. I will argue that the two characters under discussion have several common characteristics, most strikingly the rejection of their former lives and the adoption of a new mentor or parent-like figure. The comparison between Elisha and Ruth also underscores significant differences between the two, highlighting the very different characters and fates of the two protagonists. Finally, I believe that this study will enable us to uncover certain lessons that the Bible wishes to teach us about loyalty, failure, and continuity.

In Ruth 1:8-15, Naomi, widow of Elimelech from Bethlehem, importunes her two Moabite daughters-in-law to return to Moab, and not to accompany her on the journey back to Judea. Naomi insists that the two women, widows of her sons, have no future in Judea, hinting that no men will agree to marry them, presumably because of their Moabite ethnicity. Orpah reluctantly agrees to return home, but Ruth refuses and clings to Naomi, despite the very real possibility that she will be unable to find a husband and establish a family in her new home. In her famous declaration, she avers that Naomi's God, land, and burial place will be hers as well (Ruth 1:16-17). When Naomi sees that Ruth refuses to leave her, she drops her objections, and implicitly accepts Ruth's offer. As time goes on, Naomi becomes more and more connected to Ruth (3:1 and 18). By the end of the book, the women of Bethlehem sing Ruth's praises to Naomi, proclaiming that Ruth loves Naomi and is more precious to her than seven sons (4:15).

Why does Naomi try to dissuade her daughters-in-law from joining her on her return to Judea? As stated above, she may have been concerned for their welfare. But she may also have felt that returning to Judea with two Moabite daughters-in-law was an embarrassment that she wished to avoid. Not only *Ruth Walfish has a Ph.D. in Jewish Education from Hebrew University and heads the Department of Bible at Efrata Teacher's College in Jerusalem. She is an associate editor of the Jewish Bible Quarterly.*

would she be returning widowed, bereaved, and destitute, but Ruth and Orpah would testify to an additional failure: her sons had "married out." Living in a foreign land for ten years and marrying local women clearly indicated that the two men had had little intention of returning to Judea. Had they had offspring in Moab, it is even less likely that they would have considered a return to their homeland. Moreover, leaving Judea at a time of famine was surely perceived by the inhabitants as a kind of desertion,² and the longer the family of Elimelech and Naomi stayed away, the greater would be the disdain and estrangement felt towards them.³ Nevertheless, in a surprising twist, Ruth, the non-Jewish wife of Mahlon, is revealed as a true daughter of Zion, an *eshet hayil* (woman of valor),⁴ who ultimately becomes the progenitor of David, king of Israel (4:17 and 22).

Just as Naomi tried to dissuade Ruth from accompanying her on her journey back to Judea, so too did Elijah, Elisha's mentor, discourage Elisha from joining him. In the Elisha stories we can discern two separate occasions when Elijah tries to give Elisha the brush-off: in the appointment scene (I Kgs. 19:19-21) and in the farewell scene (II Kgs. 2:1-18). The appointment scene can only be understood in light of the event that preceded it, Elijah's flight from Jezebel and his experience in the desert (I Kgs. 19:1-18). The threat to his life brings Elijah to the depths of despair; he at first wishes to die (v. 4), and subsequently twice accuses the children of Israel of worshipping idols and forsaking God (vv. 10 and 14). God's reaction in the latter case is to instruct Elijah to anoint three new leaders, one of whom is Elisha the son of Shaphat, Elijah's designated successor. This is an unusual event in biblical history: Moses is the only other prophet who was told to appoint his successor. But whereas Moses voluntarily seeks a replacement for himself out of concern for the future of the nation (Num. 27:16), Elijah does not. In fact, the divine instruction to Elijah to appoint his successor can be perceived as an implied criticism of Elijah's prophetic behavior: either Elijah has failed by not preventing the infidelity that he cites, or he has failed in his task as a prophet by maligning the people rather than defending them before God (see Radak). There is, perhaps, an additional reason for this disapproval: Elijah abandoned his people on several occasions, both after he announced the drought and after Jezebel's threats. In this sense he reminds us of Elimelech, who (as we saw) left the land of Judea at the onset of famine. Abandoning his

people when they need him most is inappropriate behavior for a prophet, or for any leader, to say the least; and one can argue that by choosing to run away to the southernmost point of the Land of Israel (in addition to his suicidal wish), Elijah has demonstrated that he has lost hope in the people. And so it is time to replace him.

In the story of Elisha's appointment as successor to Elijah, we can detect a certain reluctance on Elijah's part to obey God's command. He approaches Elisha as the latter is working the field, and wordlessly throws his cloak over him, an apparent sign of election. Elisha, understanding the symbolism of the act, wishes to bid farewell to his parents, but Elijah seems to object to this, even hinting that communication with his parents shows that Elisha does not want the appointment or is not worthy of it. Interestingly enough, Naomi had urged her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, and by implication to their parents,⁵ as her way of disengaging from them; the Hebrew verbs *lekhnah* and *shovnah*, "go" and "return", appear several times in the passage.⁶ Perhaps this is Elijah's intention as well, when he says to Elisha: *Lekh shuv* (I Kgs. 19:20), *go return [to your parents]*. Commentators differ as to whether Elisha actually returned to his parents to bid them farewell,⁷ but in any event it is clear that, like Ruth, Elisha abandons his former life, and transfers his loyalty to a new object.

As to the farewell scene, here too we find that Elijah is reluctant to have Elisha accompany him on his final journey. Elijah tries to persuade Elisha to abandon him at one of the stations along the way (II Kgs. 2:1-6), be it Gilgal, Bethel, or Jericho. Elisha, for his part, takes an oath that he will not abandon his mentor (vv. 2, 4, 6), reminding us of the famous oath that Ruth took regarding her loyalty to Naomi (Ruth 1:17). After Elisha witnesses the miraculous splitting of the Jordan River, Elijah asks him what he would request, and Elisha replies, '*Let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me*' (II Kgs. 2:9). Instead of granting Elisha's request, as expected, Elijah "tests" his disciple: if Elisha sees Elijah being taken away, then indeed his wish will be granted. In the case of both Ruth-Naomi and Elisha-Elijah, therefore, the "elder statesman" is going on a critical journey which she/he would prefer to undertake alone, and only grudgingly accedes to the wish of the novice.

Why does Elijah seem to have reservations about appointing Elisha, and about the latter accompanying him on his final odyssey? I speculated in the

case of Naomi that she returned to Judea with a sense of failure and did not wish to have that failure concretized in the form of Moabite daughters-in-law. By the same token, Elijah must have felt that the command to anoint Elisha was a clear indication that he, Elijah, had failed in his prophetic mission, as argued above. Elisha represents a new era, a departure from Elijah's style of leadership. We have seen, then, that both Ruth and Elisha leave their biological parents in order to set out on a new path. Through their tenaciousness, they demonstrate that they are faithful adherents to their adoptive "parents": Elisha calls Elijah '*my father, my father*' (II Kgs. 2:12), and Ruth is called "my daughter" by Naomi on five different occasions.⁸

Ruth and Elisha are similar in another way: they both provide others with sustenance. Ruth makes sure to glean wheat for her mother-in-law so that she will survive (Ruth 2:2); and immediately upon his election as Elijah's heir, Elisha slaughters his cattle and distributes the meat to the people (I Kgs. 19:21). After assuming his prophetic role, Elisha "cures" the poisonous waters of Jericho so that the inhabitants can live in the city and not perish (II Kgs. 2:19-22). On several different occasions, in later stories (chapter 4), Elisha miraculously provides food for the needy

Based on the parallels noted so far, we can conclude that there are times when members of the "older generation", for whatever reason, find it hard to make room for their successors. Elijah may have been disappointed in himself as a prophet, and a successor could be a painful reminder of this fact. The sojourn in Moab was a disaster for Naomi, and she may not have wished to be reminded of that period in her life. But when the "candidates" of the future, whether appointed or self-appointed, refuse to accept rejection, persist in clinging to their mentors, and live up to their expectations, they are able to prove that they are indeed worthy of fulfilling the tasks that lie ahead. Failure need not be viewed as a final judgment; there is still the possibility of change and correction in the next generation.

Up to this point we have noted similarities between Ruth and Elisha, and what these similarities can teach us. I believe that the differences between them are equally instructive.

Naomi and Ruth travel together from Moab to Judea. They are leaving a land of exile and entering the Land of Israel, where Ruth will embrace the Jewish tradition and homeland. It is interesting to observe that while still an

inhabitant of Moab, Ruth did not formally embrace Judaism: Jewish practice at that time was, it seems, inextricably bound up with living in the Land. Elijah and Elisha, on the other hand, are leaving the Land of Israel in their final act together, crossing the Jordan to the other side. As scholars have pointed out,⁹ the sites that the two pass through are related to Joshua's conquest of the land. Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho are all places that Joshua conquered or where he encamped. Passing through them and crossing the Jordan in the reverse direction taken by Joshua seems to indicate that the conquest of the land is no longer an assured fact. Admittedly, Elisha will cross back after the "death" of Elijah, but he has been inexorably touched by exile, and only a few chapters later the Northern Kingdom will experience exile (II Kgs. 17). Indeed, the direction taken by that journey is just one indication of the vast differences between the two stories. One could argue that the stories are really polar opposites; one is a story of hope, the other a story of impending doom.

Even before the exile of the ten tribes, the land is plagued by drought and famine. Contrast this with the news that Naomi receives, that Judea is experiencing a renewal and there is enough food for everyone, thanks to God's intervention (Ruth 1:6). Elisha resorts to miracles in order to answer the pressing call for food; nowhere does God intervene directly to end the famine and revive the land.¹⁰ Ruth, however, benefits from a system of charity whereby landowners set aside some of their produce for the poor. Society as a whole is not dependent on miracles in order to function; entrenched laws and customs provide the hungry with their basic needs. Indeed, Elisha the "miracle worker" is called upon time and again to save the downtrodden, the leprous, the army besieged, and the famished when all else fails. In the story of Ruth there are no supernatural elements; the people bring about their own salvation and redemption through acts of *hesed*, loving kindness.

Another interesting difference between the two stories is the ultimate fate of the two main characters. After leaving his parents and joining Elijah, Elisha remains a somewhat enigmatic (and at times anti-social) figure. Like his mentor, Elijah, he apparently never marries. Ruth, on the other hand, despite all the obstacles in her way, marries and has a child. Not only does she renew herself, but she also rejuvenates her mother-in-law, who experiences a second motherhood with the birth of Obed, Ruth's son (Ruth 4:17). As stated above,

Ruth is the progenitor of David, the great king of Israel. He stands in contrast to the rulers of Elisha's time, who mostly suffer from a lack of faith. At times, Elisha confronts these kings and chastises them for their failings. It is a sad commentary on Israelite kingship, which has degenerated from the once exalted position that it enjoyed at the time of David to such a debased level at the time of Elijah and Elisha.

What can we conclude from the contrast between the two characters and the events that surround them? It would seem that the Bible celebrates normal, natural existence, marriage and family. Even when catastrophe strikes, as it did with Elimelech's family, people can help each other and work toward creating a just community. What also emerges is the centrality of the Land of Israel: true redemption can take place only there, and exile is the dire punishment for flouting the rules of the Torah. While Elisha is clearly Elijah's successor, and a miracle-worker ordained by God, he cannot effect a real change in society. It is the "Ruths" of this world, in their day-to-day, normative behavior, who seem capable of affecting others, setting off a chain of action that can deeply influence history.

NOTES

1. After submitting this article, I discovered that Yosefa Rachaman had recently published an article with a similar theme: "Ruth and Elisha: Common Features and Differences," in: *B.D.D.*, April 26, 2012, pp. 81-90 (Hebrew). Rachaman cites many parallels between the two characters, some of which I have also noted. However, she has chosen not to focus on the story of Elisha's election, which plays a major role in my study. In addition, Rachaman's conclusions center primarily on the relationship between Elisha and Elijah, whereas I have broadened my outlook to include larger national issues that come into play in each story.
2. Compare *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4. In this *derashah*, Elimelech is portrayed as a wealthy man who could have provided his hungry compatriots with food, but chose instead to desert them and flee to Moab, where he would not be "bothered" by the poor and needy.
3. Some commentators have understood the words with which the women of Bethlehem greet Naomi upon her return, "*Can this be Naomi?*" (Ruth 1:19), as expressing their grim satisfaction that this deserter is now in such dire straits.
4. Ruth 3:11.
5. Naomi does not explicitly mention the return to the parents, but Boaz refers to it in his encounter with Ruth (2:11): *You have left your father and your mother.*
6. Ruth 1, vv. 8, 11, 12.
7. See the discussion of this question in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to I Kings 19:20.
8. Interestingly, Naomi does not call Ruth "*my daughter*" after Ruth declares her loyalty to Naomi, but only after Ruth and she are settled in Bethlehem, and Ruth offers to glean wheat for them both.

9. See: Elhanan Samet, *Pirkei Eliyyahu* (Jerusalem, 2003) p. 500 (Hebrew).

10. The story of the four lepers (II Kgs. 7) tells of a temporary relief from starvation, brought about by divine intervention (v. 6), but there is no long-lasting salvation.



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SINAI UPSIDE-DOWN: THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF A MIDRASH

RAYMOND APPLE

The two major lines of Jewish exegesis are *peshat* – the plain meaning, and *derash* – the homiletical interpretation. It could be said that *peshat* is more objective and *derash* more subjective, but this generalization should not be pressed too far. There is a popular notion that *derash* is a sort of Jewish *Aesop's Fables*, a collection of legendary material that provides extra drama and color; but it would be a mistake to imagine that the masters of Midrash were mere tellers of tales. In most *midrashim* there is a message which we can begin to uncover by asking: What idea does the midrashic text want to teach? When we ask this question we find that the Sages of the Midrash were serious philosophers who often used *derash* to address major problems in theology and ethics.

This paper shows how the exegesis of an ambiguous word in the Bible leads in two different directions, with the contrast between *peshat* and *derash* allowing the rabbinic Sages to read important theological content into – or out of – a seemingly innocuous verse. That verse is Exodus 19:17, which speaks about where the Israelites were when the Torah was given.

The verse reads: *va-yiyatzevu be-tahtit ha-har*. If we try to imagine the scene, we may visualize a large crowd gathered in open country with the mountain looming in the background, apparently indicating a *peshat* of *they stood at the foot of the mountain*. *Tahtit* is connected with *tahat*, "under, below, beneath." These translations appear to be interchangeable synonyms, and are generally treated as such.¹ However, they are capable of being separated into two categories – "low/lower/lowest" and also "below/under/beneath." Because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew words, the translations of *tahat* and *tahtit* waver between "at the foot of" and "beneath." In Brown, Driver and Briggs' *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*,² *ad she'ol tahtit* (Deuteronomy 32:22) is translated as *to the lowest She'ol* (the nether-world). The Jewish Publication Society of America 1917 translation of the Bible renders the phrase *unto the depths of the nether-*

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world; the 1962 translation gives *to the base of the hills*. Three times, in Ezekiel 31:14, 16, and 18, the text has *eretz tahtit*, meaning *the nether parts of the earth* according to the JPS 1917 translation, but *the lowest part of the nether-world* in the 1962 version, which – probably in view of the parallel *bor, the pit*, at the end of verse 14 – sees it as a reference to She'ol, the subterranean abode of the dead. In that case *tahtit* is not *at the base of* something, but *below* the surface. We thus see that the translation of *tahtit* varies between "low" and "under."

However, when it comes to Exodus 19:17b, the 1917 JPS version translates the Hebrew as *They stood at the nether part of the mount*. Similarly, the 1962 version reads: *They took their places at the foot of the mountain*. This indicates – as we noted above – an assemblage in open country at the foot of the mountain: the camp is on *terra firma*, beside but close to the base of the mountain, with Mount Sinai as an impressive backdrop. This is accepted by Rashi, who writes: "In its literal meaning, (*be-tahtit ha-har*) signifies *be-raglei ha-har*, at the foot of the mountain." Similarly, Moses' recollection of the event in Deuteronomy 4:11, *Va-ta'amdun tahtat ha-har*, is understood in both the 1917 JPS version (*Ye stood under the mountain*) and the 1962 version (*You stood at the foot of the mountain*) as having *tahtat* refer to the base of Mount Sinai.

Rashi adds to his first, *peshat*-based comment, a second, contrasting *derash* that the people were standing not *at the base of* but literally *beneath* the mountain. This *derash* is linguistically possible in view of the evidence above that both *tahtit* and *tahtat* can be *at the foot of* and *beneath*. However, Rashi justifies the *derash* not on the basis of linguistics, but on an *aggadah* in TB *Shabbat* 88a (with parallels in *Avodah Zarah* 2b, *Mekhilta Ba-Hodesh* 3, etc.), where Rabbi Avdimi (elsewhere called Dimi) bar Hama says: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, lifted the mountain over them like an [inverted] barrel (*giggit*) and said, 'If you accept the Torah, all will be well: but if not, this will be your burial place'."³ The biblical text itself lends no explicit support to this tableau, although the Sages read it into the story in order to draw out a religious teaching.

In this *aggadah*, *giggit* is generally, but not necessarily, understood to mean a barrel. Jastrow⁴ gives several alternatives: "something arched, roofing, a huge vessel, tub, tank (for brewing beer); reservoir." The word is rather clear-

ly based on the Biblical Hebrew *gag*, a roof (e.g., Judg. 9:51). The idea of inverting a *giggit* is not unique to this *aggadah*; there is also a halakhic discussion in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 77a) which reads, "*Kafah alav giggit . . . if one inverts a tub over a man so that he dies.*" It should be noted that if a mountain is dropped, its weight and solidity would crush the victim/s, whereas a presumably empty tub, barrel, etc., would kill by suffocation.

A further note should be added about *tahtit* and *giggit*: since both end in *it*, the Sages – perhaps with a droll sense of humor – may be positing a contrast of opposites (something low with something high).

There are several – non-identical – manuscripts of Rashi's commentary extant, and in some the threat is not "this will be your burial place" but "I will turn the world back to confusion and chaos" (*tohu va-vohu*; Gen. 1:2). This type of threat is found in a number of other places, e.g., a *piyyut* (liturgical hymn) that puts into God's mouth the words, "(If you cavil at My decrees) I will turn the world back to water, to *tohu va-vohu*."⁵ Still, despite their disagreement over details, the various versions of the Midrash all agree that the people were terrified that God would drop the heavy mountain upon them and bury them alive and/or destroy the whole earth, so they had no choice but to accept the authority of the Torah.⁶

However, the idea that the Torah was imposed by force alarmed Rabbi Aḥa bar Ya'akov to such an extent that he feared it would undermine the authority of the Torah by providing an excuse for breaking the commandments (*Shabbat* 88a). His argument is that since the people were under Divine compulsion at Sinai, if they later sinned they could plead, "Why blame us and punish us? It is not our fault. You forced us to accept the Torah!" By way of response, TB *Avodah Zarah* 2b-3a advances a theory that even without fully voluntary motivation, which is the ideal, there would still be some degree of reward for observing the commandments. In *Shabbat* 88a, Rava gives an answer founded on the statement that in the days of Mordecai and Esther, *kiyyemu ve-kibbelu ha-yehudim – the Jews confirmed and accepted* the duty to commemorate the events leading up to the festival of Purim (Esth. 9:27). Rava explains that the people took time to affirm their previous acceptance of the Torah at Sinai; at first there was an element of compulsion, but now – although the new attitude needed several centuries to develop – they willingly affirmed it. Rava's actual words are: "They reaccepted it [the Torah] in the

days of Ahasuerus; they confirmed what they had accepted long before."⁷ Whether there is a literal significance in the words "in the days of Ahasuerus" is open to question. The fact that the people's affirmation is attributed to that period may simply indicate "a long time afterwards." It may possibly hint at the renewal of the covenant in Ezra's time (Neh. 10:30).⁸

The midrashic story of the mountain that became a barrel upturned over the people's heads introduces a new theological idea – that God forced the Israelites to accept the Torah. In line with common rabbinic practice, the story presents this concept in vivid, homely terms. Without academic philosophical analysis, the story forces the reader to confront head-on the issue of coercion and responsibility. The midrash seems to teach us that in receiving the Torah there was an element of coercion, along with the willing acceptance mentioned explicitly in the Biblical account (Ex. 19:8).

The central question that must be asked is: Why did the rabbis introduce the idea that the Jewish people were forced by God to accept the Torah? The language of the phrase, *be-tahtit ha-har*, could easily be interpreted to mean "at the foot of the mountain," and all other indications from the Bible are that the Israelites accepted the Torah willingly. So why did the Sages create a midrash that introduces the difficult concept of coercion and then have to devise ways to explain that there was also a willing acceptance of the Torah?

This question is dealt with by *Tosafot* (TB *Shabbat* 88a, *kaffa*). *Tosafot* asks: "Since they said, '*na'aseh ve-nishma* – We will do and we will hear' [Ex. 24:7: *ve-nishma* can be translated *and obey*: see the 1917 JPS version], why did they need a Divine threat?" If – as *na'aseh ve-nishma* implies – they accepted the Torah of their own free will, why did they need to be coerced? *Tosafot* explains that it was to make sure the Israelites did not later change their mind. Something that is accepted voluntarily may then be discarded, and it was historically necessary for the Torah to be kept forever by the Jewish people. The lesson would then be that voluntary acceptance might later be abandoned and is therefore not sufficient; there must be a core feeling of loyal obligation that motivates observance of the *mitzvot*.

Another way to understand the role of this midrash is that it serves to point out that everywhere in human experience we are subject to considerable – and inescapable – coercion. Real spontaneity of action hardly ever happens. Everyone is – consciously or not – constantly affected by lineage, upbringing-

ing, and surrounding influences, by heredity and environment, society and state. The Israelites themselves were "coerced" to accept the Torah by the awesome miracles that they had recently witnessed, the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the awesome display of God's Presence at Mount Sinai. Psychologically, could they really reject the Torah under these circumstances?

An interesting parallel is found in TB *Sotah* 34a, where Joshua tells the Israelites while crossing the Jordan that the purpose of their crossing is to conquer the Land of Israel, and if they do not agree to this the water will come and wash them away. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Sotah* 7:5, quoted by *Tosafot*; TB *Sotah* 34a, *odam*) presents a similar scenario. There, Resh Lakish states that when crossing the Jordan, the Israelites accepted responsibility for each other's private transgressions. Joshua is then presented as telling the Israelites, "If you do not accept responsibility for each other's hidden transgressions, the waters will come and wash you away." Here again, the Israelites are forced to accept responsibility under pain of death. Conceptually, what does this account have in common with the Mount Sinai episode? Perhaps the idea is that the acceptance of the Torah, the willingness to fight for the Land of Israel, and the concept of mutual responsibility are all fundamental to the idea of the Jews as a people. Without a shared set of values and a sense of a common homeland and destiny, there is no glue holding the Israelites together as a distinct entity. That is why they are "forced" to accept these obligations, for without them the Israelites would cease to exist as a people and be washed away like many other civilizations.

Another way of viewing this midrash is that it teaches us that the relationship of the Jewish people with the Torah develops over time. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (*Ein Ayah*, vol. 4, on TB *Shabbat* 88a) develops this point by suggesting that it is a basic element of Jewish experience and identity that a Jew should constantly internalize – with increasing depth – the Judaism he/she already has. The midrash notes that the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai was just the first step in a process that culminated only in the time of Esther, at the very end of the biblical period.

One is reminded of the question – said to have been asked of one of the Hasidic teachers – as to why the calendar has a gap of several months between the festival of Shavu'ot, when the Torah was given, and Simḥat Torah,

when it is celebrated. The response attributed to the particular Rebbe was that the encounter at Sinai which bound God and Israel started as an arranged marriage, a *shiddukh*, but then, with time, the spouses came to know and love each other and could now rejoice with one another unrestrainedly.

This concept of a developing relationship with the Torah may also lie behind the approach offered by *Midrash Tanhuma* (No'ah, ch. 3), which states that *na'aseh ve-nishma* denotes the Written Torah and *har ke-giggit* the Oral Torah. This distinction is quoted and apparently accepted by Hizkuni, who ends his remarks on Exodus 19:17b with the brief statement, *Torah she-be-al peh lo kibbelu adayin*, "They had not yet accepted the Oral Torah." This implies that the people accepted the Written Torah at Sinai, but were initially reluctant to commit themselves to the Oral Torah, although time allowed them to subsequently discover and recognize its wisdom, and that is when they confirmed it. This approach indicates the crucial role of the people themselves in the evolution of the Oral Torah.

The midrashic material that we have assembled provides a way of addressing philosophical issues, especially the ideas of coercion and willing acceptance. The rabbinic *derash* on a verse in Exodus is thus a peg on which to hang an exercise in serious philosophy and must not be dismissed as merely a colorful narrative, a figment of the homiletical imagination.

NOTES

1. *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, abridged edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964) sec. 207.
2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 1066.
3. In his comment to Exodus 19:17, Rashi slightly varies the midrash as found in the Talmud, basing himself on the terminology of the *Mekhilta* (*loc. cit.*): "The mountain was plucked up from its place and arched over them like a barrel." There may be some significance in this version's lack of a direct ascription of the upturning of the mountain to the Holy One, Blessed be He, since Rashi's text uses a passive formulation: "The mountain was plucked up (*nitlash*) . . . and arched (*nikhpah*)."
4. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, etc.* (New York: Title Publishing Company, 1943) p. 234.
5. *Elleh Ezkerah*, Musaf service for Yom Kippur.
6. Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th cent.) picks up a comment of Bekhor Shor that, as a result of the series of natural phenomena which punctuated the Revelation (Ex. 19), the people were *haredim vi-yere'im la-tzet* – "trembling and afraid to go out"; and he suggests that the people protected themselves by cowering under the mountain – *mi-penei pahad ha-kolot ve-haberakim*, "because they were afraid of the thunder and lightning." Their fear and awe may have

been at the solemnity of the moment. This view could have been influenced by the *Mekhilta* (*loc. cit.*), which applies to the Children of Israel the verse, *yonati be-hagvei ha-sela – O my dove that is in the clefts of the rock* (Song of Songs 2:14), the dove being a poetic term for *keneset Yisra'el*, the congregation of Israel (see Ps. 74:19, TB *Bava Kamma* 93a, Cant. R. 1:15, 4:1, etc.), although "in the clefts" is not at all the same as "beneath." One wonders why the *Mekhilta* did not find a precedent in Exodus 33:22, *ve-samikhha be-nikrat ha-tzur – I will place you in a cleft of the rock*. Despite Hizkuni's suggestion, the Rabbi Avdimi version with its story of Divine duress remains popular in Jewish thought.

7. *Confirmed and accepted* is a literal translation of the Hebrew, although the 1917 JPS translation reads *ordained and took upon them* and the 1962 version says *undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves*. The context makes it clear that what the Jews of the time undertook was the annual celebration of Purim. Verse 23 of chapter 9 states, *The Jews took upon themselves as an obligation what they had begun to practice*, which implies that their spontaneous rejoicing at the time of the actual Purim events was thereafter formalized to bring into being an annual festival that became binding upon them and all future generations. This decision was made by Mordecai and his rabbinic contemporaries, using the authority to make enactments conferred by Deuteronomy 17:9 upon *the judge that shall be in those days*.

8. Whichever interpretation one accepts, there remains a linguistic problem in the *ketiv*, the written text of Esther 9:27 (similarly in verse 23), which spells the word for "accepted" as *kibbel* - in the singular. The view of the Zohar is that Moses (in the singular) received the Torah and the people (plural) confirmed it. Moses acted on their behalf; they then ratified his action.



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FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM: THE ONOMASTICS OF THE PERIOD

FRED BLUMENTHAL

The Bible often presents genealogical lists containing many personal names, with no indication as to the origin, meaning or significance of these names (onomastics). While Rachel and Leah spell out the reasons for the names given to each of their children, we are usually left to wonder about the significance of other proper names. Talmudic and midrashic literature sometimes provides a meaning, for example TB *Sotah* 36b, which illuminates the reason for the name given to each of Benjamin's ten sons. A particularly interesting case is that of Peleg, whose name is explained in the Bible as due to the fact that *in his days the earth was divided* (Gen. 10:25). Now Peleg was born hundreds of years before the division of humanity into nations, as a result of the Tower of Babel, so how could he have been named for a future event? We must understand that the Biblical narrator wished to explain that Peleg was an appropriate name, since it foreshadowed events that would take place during his lifetime. On that basis, names can be understood to have a significance derived from events at the time of a person's birth or much later.¹

Since the Bible, particularly the Pentateuch, is focused not so much on recounting historical facts as on imparting religious dogmas and instruction, we might wonder why it is considered important to name everyone in the line of descent from Noah to Abraham, instead of simply stating, as the Mishnah does (*Avot* 5:3), that they constituted ten generations. The list of names in the early chapters of Genesis should therefore be seen to have a particular significance.²

Scholars have noted that many of these names appear to refer to geographic locations, much like the children of Noah's three sons. For example, the name of

Nahor (Abraham's grandfather) is supposedly connected with Tel-Nahir, a location known from Assyrian documents.³ Such historically based commentaries overlook the underlying themes of the Pentateuch, and I propose instead to treat these names in the way that the Bible explains that of Peleg, *Fred Blumenthal z"l was a retired businessman from Jerusalem and Cedarhurst, New York. He was educated at the Samson Raphael Hirsch School and the Yeshiva of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and had pursued biblical studies throughout his adult life.*

as a name bearing a meaningful and appropriate message. This approach can already be found in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's comments to Genesis 11, where he states that these names hint at the spiritual development of mankind through ten generations.

The period from Noah to Abraham can be divided into two major eras, separated by the Tower of Babel. This is demonstrated by the names of the personalities enumerated in chapter 11 of Genesis. The first era describes mourning and fear for the future.⁴ The few survivors of the deluge had all lost friends and relatives. The wives of Noah's sons, for example, had to mourn parents and siblings. These feelings are illustrated by the names given to people of that time, as we shall show. The era after Babel reveals the consequences of mankind's division into separate nations and linguistic groups. Following this division, men started to invent different religions and lost the unifying monotheistic belief of Noah's time. The names of this period hint at the existence of these new religions and the role of Abraham as an iconoclast who rediscovered the belief in one God.

MIDRASHIC DERIVATIONS OF THE NAMES FROM THE TIME AFTER NOAH

SHEM

This word usually means "name" but also has the connotation of perpetuity – as, for example, in Genesis 11:4; Deuteronomy 25:7 and Isaiah 56:5. It thereby reflects the conviction of Noah, who was aware of the impending Flood, that mankind would survive. This meaning accords with the lifespan of Shem, which was longer than any other biblical figure of his time.

ARPACHSHAD

The derivation of this name is still considered a mystery, although it is sometimes understood to mean "healer," because the letters *r-p* are an allusion to the root *rafa* (or *rippe*, "to heal").⁵ The last two letters of this name are an abbreviation of *Shaddai* ("the Almighty"), so that it comes to mean "the Lord heals." Since Arpachshad was the first in the Noah-Abraham genealogy born after the Flood, his name may refer to the emotional pain that the catastrophic event must have caused, while healing this pain was uppermost in the mind of his parents.

SHELAH

This name (Shelah in Hebrew) conveys the idea of stretching out and releasing (from the root *sh-l-h*), but it is also associated with the *waters of Shiloah that flow softly* (Isa. 8:6). The name may also be based on the root *sh-l-h*, meaning "to be calm, tranquil." As such, it could mean the exact opposite of the stormy Flood waters that drowned so many people, indicating that water can also be calm and beneficial.

EBER

The word (Ever in Hebrew) generally means crossing a boundary or river and landing safely on the other side. We find it used to describe Abraham as *ha-Ivri* ("the Hebrew," Gen. 14:13). There, *Genesis Rabbah* 42:13 offers multiple interpretations: one expresses the idea that Abraham was geographically "from the other side" of the Euphrates river; another suggests that Abraham was a religious nonconformist – "all the world was on one side and he was on the other." In the case of Eber, it can also be seen as reflecting a metaphorical crossing, from dread to a belief that men need no longer live in fear of a catastrophe such as the deluge. Such a crossing into a new era paved the way for the abortive Tower of Babel project and the splitting of mankind into different linguistic and national groups.

PELEG

This name, as explained in the text (Gen. 10:25), points to the ordained separation of mankind into different nations.

REU

I suggest that this name derives from the word *ro'eh* ("shepherd"), one who guides and protects his flock. Repeatedly, in biblical texts, the relationship between God and His people is expressed in terms of a shepherd and his charges. At the end of his commentary to Genesis 10, Abrabanel includes a long discussion of the material in Josippon regarding the early generations of man.⁷ There he quotes the tradition that in the time of Reu, "kings began to make themselves gods." The name thus represents the beginning of idolatry, when kings were deified and seen as the true "shepherds" of men. Magical

powers or a supernatural origin were then believed to make kings and leaders the godlike rulers of the population.

SERUG

This name is generally understood to refer to a geographical location,⁶ but it can also be viewed as related to the word *sarig* ("branch"), as in Genesis 40:10. S. R. Hirsch, in his commentary to Genesis 11:10, explains that it hints at the idea that there was a continuous development of idolatry in Serug's time. Since the word implies growth from a tree or plant, it may represent the beginning of man-made wooden idols and the deification of trees, such as the *asherah*.

NAHOR

To interpret the name of Abraham's grandfather (Nah̄or in Hebrew), we must recognize that the letters *het* (ח) and *he* (ה) are sometimes interchanged in the Bible, especially in proper names.⁸ Nahor's name may therefore have its origin in the root *nahar*, as in Isaiah 60:5 and Psalm 34:6, where the word signifies "lighting up, being radiant." On the basis of that meaning, and the fact that the Midrash understood the idolaters of Abraham's time and place to be fire-worshippers (most famously in the Abraham/Nimrod confrontation in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13), the invention and popularity of sun/fire worship are evidently reflected in this name.

TERAH

After the introduction of sun worship represented by Nah̄or, we may assume that the similarity of this name to *yare'ah* ("moon") points to idolatrous worship of the moon. The Midrash notes that Abraham, as a youth, first considered both the sun and the moon as possible deities before he realized that since they constantly rise and set, there must be a Creator who controls them.⁹

The genealogy from Noah to Abraham and the names detailed in the Bible can thus be read as a chronicle of socio-religious evolution during the post-Noachian era, moving from the trauma of the Flood to the division into nations and the deification of sun and moon, culminating in Abraham's reintroduction of the true monotheistic religion.

NOTES

1. See Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), esp. p. 17; and Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996) p. 151 (Hebrew).
2. Compare the author's article "Biblical Onomastics: What's in a Name?", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 37:2 (April-June 2009) pp. 124-128.
3. See Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 86.
4. The fact that God promised Noah that there would never be another Flood does not invalidate this statement. We know that all prophetic communications (except for Moses) left some doubts in the recipient (see Num. 12:6).
5. See E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible – Genesis* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1987) p. 70.
6. See Sarna, p. 84; Cassuto, p. 171.
7. Josippon is a chronicle of Jewish history probably compiled in the tenth century. It was very popular among medieval Jews and respected by them as a historical source.
8. See Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) pp. 248-9 and 251-2.
9. A. Jellinek, *Beit Ha-Midrash*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 1938) p. 118.



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WHO KNOWS SEVEN?

YOSEF GREEN

Among all peoples certain numbers have played more significant roles than others, for reasons we cannot always understand. Such are the numbers three, five, and ten.¹ Preeminent above all others in Semitic life and thought is the number seven. For the Israelites, one has only to recall the seven days of Creation (including the Sabbath), the Sabbatical year, the Jubilee,² the Feast of Weeks, the seven days of Passover and Tabernacles, and the seven-branched Menorah. One can easily add the tradition of the seven Canaanite peoples, the seven processions around Jericho, the Seven Species with which the Land of Israel is blessed (Deut. 8:7-8), the Seven Noachian Laws, the seventy years in Jeremiah, the seventy weeks in Daniel, the seven eyes in Zechariah,³ and countless other instances from the Bible and rabbinic literature.

Since time immemorial, man has ascribed exceptional properties and unusual mystique to the number seven. Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) held that "Seven has the most various and marvelous attributes."⁴

Why is the number seven so significant? One approach is to view seven as a number deriving its special status from the concept of a week, which was itself derived from dividing the month into quarters. However, months are not evenly divisible by weeks and the beginning of a month was never tied to the start of a week.⁵ Nor does the theory provide an answer to the question as to why the number seven in folklore (especially of the Mediterranean region) is associated with prayers for rain, fertility, and wealth.⁶ This is even seen in Pharaoh's dream, where the seven cows and seven ears of grain are interpreted by Joseph to foreshadow years of fertility and drought (Gen. 41).

Among the first to suggest an answer to the question was Philo in his *Account of the World's Creation*:

Now, when the whole world had been brought to completion in accordance with the properties of six, a perfect number, the Creator invested with dignity the seventh day which comes next, extolling it and pronouncing it holy; for it is the festival, not of a single city account or country, but of the universe, and it alone strictly deserves to

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be called *public* as belonging to all people and the birthday of the world. I doubt that anyone could adequately celebrate the properties of the number seven, for they are beyond all words. Yet the fact that it is more wondrous than all that is said about it is no reason for maintaining silence regarding it. Nay, we must make a brave attempt to bring out at least all that is within the compass of our understanding, even if be impossible to bring out all or even the most essential points.⁷

Based on Philo, it may be that the number seven is associated with fertility simply because this number represents the original creation of all life. However, I believe that a possible explanation can be found in the geographical region occupied in antiquity by the Canaanites and the Israelites, a region governed by a rather unique pattern of climatic conditions. In this region the year consists of two seasons: the dry summer and the rainy winter. Both are approximately of equal duration.

In his book, *Geshem Ve-Ru'ah* ("Rain and Wind"), Professor Pinḥas Alpert, a geophysicist at Tel-Aviv University, writes that the climatic conditions that prevail in Israel exist in only one other place on earth, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Alpert doesn't hesitate to conjecture that this extraordinary phenomenon is a sign of the special providence which the Land of Israel merited and finds confirmation in the Pentateuch, where it is written:

The land which you are about to enter and occupy is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and occupy, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land ... on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end (Deut. 11:10-12).

The beginning of each of these seasons is marked on the Jewish calendar by a major festival, the beginning of the dry season by Pesah (Passover) and the start of the rainy season by Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles). Prayers for dew on Pesah and for rain on Sukkot are a central feature in the liturgy of both festivals. Since the seasons each last for six months, when counting from the beginning of the dry season, Nisan, the rainy season begins in the seventh month, Tishrei. Similarly, when counting from the beginning of the

rainy season, the seventh month begins the dry season. It thus seems reasonable to view the unique climate in the area as the origin of the number seven's significance due to its association with fertility and rainfall.

Following the dry months, the need for rain is critical. Thus, on Sukkot, prayers for rain are accompanied by acts such as the shaking of a bouquet made of willows and myrtles bound to a palm branch (*lulav*) and a citron (*etrog*), all species associated with water and rainfall.⁹ One reason given for shaking the bouquet left, right, forward, backward, up and down is to imitate the stormy winds which precede the heavy rain and shake the branches of the trees.¹⁰ On the seventh day of Sukkot, five willows are tied together and whipped on a hard surface until leaves fall to the ground, signaling the end of the dry summer.¹¹

The *sukkah* (booth) is likewise rich in symbolism. It is covered in such a manner as to enable its occupants to see the stars through the foliage. This, I suggest, is a symbolic request for the stars to be replaced by rain clouds after a cloudless summer.

Throughout the festival, seven biblical luminaries called *ushpizin* (guests) are invited to visit the *sukkah*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. The merit of these Seven Shepherds of Israel¹² will hopefully hasten an abundant rainfall.¹³

On the seventh day of Sukkot, known as Hoshana Rabba, prayers for rain are chanted as the worshippers complete seven circuits around the reader's desk at the center of the synagogue, just as the priests encircled the altar seven times in the Temple. A total of seventy bulls were sacrificed during the course of the seven-day feast of the seventh month.¹⁴

In his book, *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves notes that in antiquity, Egyptian priests did seven circumambulations around the shrine of Osiris. According to Plutarch, the reason for these circuits was the yearning of the goddess for the water of the sun god Dionysus.¹⁵ In Morocco, in time of drought, a black cow was led seven times around a shrine to bring on the rain. In Kurdistan, Jerusalem and Safed, during a drought, graves were encircled seven times by seven old men after ashes were put on their heads or sprinkled on seven Torah scrolls.¹⁶

The drought during the reign of King Ahab, vividly described in the Bible,

came to an end after the prophet Elijah sent his servant seven times to the peak of Mount Carmel (I Kgs. 18:44). Another example of the number seven's association with rainfall in the Bible was the unforgivable sacrifice of the sons of King Saul, whom King David handed over to the Gibeonites. The seven victims were brutally impaled at the beginning of the barley harvest, which coincided with the onset of the dry season. Their bodies were not taken down *until rain from heaven dropped upon them* (II Sam. 21:10).

During the period of the Second Temple, on the Sukkot festival, a golden flagon was filled with water from the Siloam Pool every day and carried to the Temple in a joyful procession. The vessel was delivered to the officiating priest, who then emptied it into a silver pitcher and poured the water over the altar. This ceremony, known as *nissukh ha-mayim* (water libation), and the festivities of *Simḥat Bet ha-Sho'evah* were intended to bring fertilizing rain, without which all plant life withers and the land remains arid.¹⁷ Rain water is needed to sustain both human and animal life. An estimated 97 percent of the water that fills the oceans is non-potable. A further two percent is trapped in icebergs, leaving only one percent of potable water available for drinking and cooking.

At the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles, pilgrims were given fourteen days (twice seven) to return home. On the fifteenth day, coinciding with the seventh day of Marḥeshvan, the words *Ve-ten tal u-matar li-verakkhah* ("Bestow dew and rain for a blessing") were inserted in the daily *Amidah*.¹⁸ Even the name of the month when reciting this prayer begins, Marḥeshvan, is traditionally associated with rain – based on the idea that the Hebrew word *mar* can mean a drop of water (as in Isaiah 40:15).¹⁹

Following a rainstorm it is not unusual for a rainbow to appear in the sky. Sir Isaac Newton, influenced by the special significance of the number seven, identified seven colors in the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.²⁰

Moreover, the number seven extends beyond the blessings of fertile land, since it is also associated with the fertility of man and beast. As procreation is considered a primary purpose of the marital union, it is not surprising that the bride circles the bridegroom seven times at the wedding ceremony. The Sev-

en Blessings (*Sheva Berakhot*) recited under the bridal canopy are repeated at every wedding feast for the ensuing seven days.²¹ The number seven, which appears in customs followed by barren women to induce pregnancy and give birth to viable offspring, were known and practiced by Jewish women in Cyprus,²² Salonika,²³ and classical Greece.²⁴

The act of taking an oath in the Bible can likewise be traced to the number seven and fertility. The Hebrew term for an oath, *shevu'ah*, is cognate with *sheva* (seven). In the Bible, a solemn oath was taken by placing one's hand under the thigh of the man administering it. The proximity of the thigh to the seat of the male generative power made non-fulfillment of the oath a reason for trepidation.²⁵ *Sheva* also denotes multiplicity, while its derivatives – *shefa* and *sova* – connote abundance, plenty, fullness and satiety.

There is archeological evidence indicating that the significance of the number seven was already recognized and emphasized along the Mediterranean coast in Neolithic times. Records from Mesopotamia, where seven appears as a sacred, formulistic number, are not documented in writing until the Bronze Age. In all probability, the distinct significance of the number seven was not at first known in Mesopotamia, arriving there later from the Mediterranean coast.²⁶

We can now gain a better understanding of the following passage from the Midrash:

That which comes seventh in order is most loved. For example: 1) the seventh heaven, 2) In the sequence of the generations the seventh after Adam is Enoch . . . 3) Of Jesse's sons David is the seventh, 4) During the Sabbatical year there is a remission of debts and the land shall lie fallow, 5) The year concluding the seventh of the seven-year cycles is most loved, for it is followed by the Jubilee year, 6) In the succession of days, the seventh is most loved (also blessed and holy), 7) In the succession of months, the seventh is the one most loved.²⁷

This tells us how number seven acts as a facilitator of manifold blessings, but it does not explain why "seven has the most various and marvelous attributes" and why it is considered holy, pure and most loved. The reason is that at its core, seven represents rainfall and fertility, and is thus the source of all blessing. So much so, in fact, that the number seven was even associated

by Philo with God Himself, "Of Him seven may be fitly said to be a symbol."²⁸

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NOTES

1. See Edwin Radford and Mona A. Radford, *Encyclopedia of Superstitions* (Kessinger Publishing, 1949) p. 183; and Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Atheneum, 1984) pp. 118-120.
2. TB *Nedarim* 61a records a dispute between R. Judah and the Sages as to whether the Jubilee year is the 49th (7 x 7) year itself or the year following the 49th. In any event, the Jubilee is linked with the concept of seven.
3. Robert Gordis, "The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 62:1 (March 1943) pp. 17-26. See there for examples from the Apocrypha and New Testament as well.
4. Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, translated into English by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker. (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1929-1953), §§ 30-43.
5. See Allen Friedman, "Unnatural Time: Its History and Theological Significance," *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, 15 (2008-2009) p. 96.
6. See, for example, Anthony Bonanno, ed., *Archaeology and the Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Malta: University of Malta Press, 1986) pp. 228, 231.
7. Philo, op .cit., p. 73.
8. Pinḥas Alpert, *Rain and Wind: Meteorology and Weather in Jewish Tradition and Modern Science* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publishing, 2011) pp. 28-31 (Heb. *Geshem Ve-Ru'ah*).
9. See Arthur Schaffer, "The Agricultural and Ecological Symbolism of the Four Species of Sukkot," *Tradition*, vol. 20(2) (Summer 1982) pp. 136-139.
10. TB *Sukkah* 37b, *Tosafot, be-hodu*, based on I Chron. 16:33-35.
11. See Bryna Levy, *Waiting for Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008) pp. 192-3.
12. Micah 5:4.
13. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Life of a Year* (Jerusalem: Israeli Institute for Talmudical Publications, 5768) pp. 104-8 (Heb. *Hayyei Shanah*).
14. Num. 29:12-34.
15. R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1948) p. 174.
16. Y. Bergman, *Jewish Folklore* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publishing, 1953) pp. 34-35 (Heb. *Ha-Folklor Ha-Yehudi*).
17. Mishnah *Sukkah* 3:1. See also Schaffer, pp. 133-6.
18. Mishnah *Ta'anit* 1:3.
19. *Arukh Ha-Shulḥan, Even Ha-Ezer* 126:17.

20. Patricia Fara, *Science: A Four Thousand Year History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 5.
21. Bergman, op .cit. (note 16).
22. I. Hadjicosta, *Cyprus and its Life* (London: 1943), p. 24.
23. M. Molho, *Birth and Childhood among the Jews of Salonica, Edot*, vol. II (1947).
24. O. Seiffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* (New York: 1956), s.v. marriages.
25. Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29.
26. Otto Schnitzler, "The Particularity of the Number Seven," *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. 1, (1970) pp. 73-80.
27. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (New York: Mandelbaum edition, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987) pp. 343-4.
28. Philo, op. cit., p. 81.



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THE MEANING OF *AND HE WENT SHEFI* (NUM. 23:3)

GILAD J. GEVARYAHU

The following verse appears in the story of Balaam: *And Balaam said to Balak: 'Place yourself by the burnt-offering, and I will go; maybe by happenstance the Lord will come to meet me; and whatever he may show me I will tell you.'* *And he went shefi* (Num. 23:3). I have purposely not translated the word *shefi*, as its meaning is in question.

Shefi does not appear in this particular construct anywhere else in the Bible. The *Biblical Encyclopedia* concludes its explanation of the term by pointing out that some interpreters liken it to the word *nishpeh* in Isaiah 13:2, meaning a "barren hilltop." In the context of the Balaam story it would thus denote where he went. This word appears numerous times in its plural form (*shefayim*) in the later Prophets (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21, 4:11, 12:12, 14:6). The encyclopedia treats this interpretation as mere speculation. Joüon takes the word to mean "a path which was smoothed by the feet of those who walked upon it." He justifies this interpretation by pointing out that *shefi* always appears in the context of roads (Isa. 49:9; Jer. 3:2 and 21, 14:11). Driver notes the similarity between *shefi* and an Arabic word meaning a sand hill. The Ben Yehudah dictionary gave up looking for a standard root and defined it as a small creek bed, also pointing out that *shefi* always appears in the context of water and grazing fields (Isa. 41:18, 49:9; Jer. 12:12). This is most evident in *I will open up streams on the bare hills [shefayim] and springs amid the valleys [beka'ot]* (Isa. 41:18), which draws a parallel between *shefayim* and *beka'ot*. The *Biblical Encyclopedia* could not reach a conclusion as to the meaning of this word.¹

Targum Onkelos translates the phrase as "and he went alone (*va-azal yehidi*)." Rashi's interpretation follows that of the Targum, explaining that the word means "alone." Rashi derives it from "the expression *shufi va-shaket*, 'ease and tranquility,' which means silence." According to this translation Balaam needed to be in a secluded place so as to receive prophecy.

In contrast to this interpretation, *Targum Yerushalmi* or *Pseudo-Jonathan* translates *shefi* as "bent down like a snake" (connected to the word *shafuf*).

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Rashbam gives "lame" (*higger*) as his interpretation, and we will return to this later. Moskowitz, in the *Da'at Mikra* series, concludes his lengthy interpretation of *shefi* by saying "and others explain 'on foot'."²

Avraham Even Shoshan, in his Hebrew dictionary,³ declares that the common explanation for (*he went*) *shefi* is "in tranquility, slowly." He nevertheless states: "This text is unclear, and my explanation is an educated guess." In his Bible concordance he gives two explanations – the first: "a tall barren hill"; the second: "slowly, methodically."⁴

The Septuagint translates the phrase as "walking straight," while the Vulgate has "walking fast."⁵ English and German translations also disagree about the meaning. Isaac Leeser translates: "and he went thoughtfully alone." *The Interpreter's Bible* (1953) writes "and he went to a bare height" and then states: "It may be better to adopt Binn's second suggestion that the word derives from the Assyrian *šēpu*, 'with hindered step,' which may indicate that Balaam was lame." The JPS (1917) translation is "and he went to a bare height" while the NJPS (1985) gives "and he went off alone," but notes that the "exact meaning of Heb. *shephi* uncertain." Similarly, the Revised King James Version has "and he went to a high place," whereas a modern German version ("nach der deutschen Übersetzung Martin Luthers," 1966) provides: "Und er ging hin auf einen kahlen Hügel [= barren hill]." J.H. Hertz in his commentary translates it as "to a bare height", and adds "the Hebrew *shefi* has also been taken as an abbreviation of the three words *sheol pi YHVH*, 'to inquire of the mouth of the Lord'."⁶

The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch, a manuscript discovered in 1956, leaves the word *shefi* mysteriously untranslated while adding that Balaam "went alone." This additional explanation imitates those of *Targum Onkelos* and Rashi mentioned previously.⁷

In conclusion, there are many interpretations of this phrase, basically having to do with walking or terrain, with no clear agreement as to its exact meaning.

It is my contention that *shefi* derives from the Akkadian word *šēpu* ("foot").⁸ The phrase *va-yelekh shefi* would then simply mean: "and he walked on foot."

The rabbis of the Talmud were familiar with this basic understanding of the word, but they thought that it referred to an injured foot: "Balaam was lame

in one foot, as it is said, *va-yelekh shefi*. Samson was lame in both feet, as it is said (Gen. 49:17), *shefifon alei oraḥ*" (TB *Sotah* 10a; TB *Sanhedrin* 105a; *Midrash Aggadah* [Buber] Gen. 49, *siman* 16; Num. 23). In the singular, *shefi* is taken to indicate one lame foot; *shefifon* is interpreted as being a plural form, thus denoting two lame feet. This is rather like Binn's approach, as noted above. However, while there are a few Akkadian terms for "lame" or "crippled", *šēpu* is not one of them.⁹

Rashbam similarly explains that *shefi* means someone who is a lame, on the basis of *ve-shuppu atzmotav* ("his bones corrode" or "are rubbed away", Job 33:21). However, he understood from the Talmud that the word indicates the leg bone rather than the foot. The Talmud does use the word *shofi* to mean the top of the hip bone, the largest one in the leg¹⁰ (TB *Hullin* 92b; TB *Avodah Zarah* 25a). Rashbam therefore read the Talmud's interpretation of the phrase to mean an "injured leg," whereas the Talmud itself was closer to following the original connotation of *shefi* [as "foot"] based on the Akkadian root. The term *šēpu* can also denote the "foot of a mountain," which may be the source of the topographical interpretations noted above.¹¹

At this point one might ask: Why does the text specifically mention the fact that Balaam went on foot? The message conveyed here is that he lost the use of his female donkey after the talking episode. The *shefi* verse appears not long after that incident, just before his first attempt to curse the Israelites. It is my guess that even Onkelos, who translated *shefi* as "alone," meant that he walked on without the donkey – in other words, on foot. Balaam's ass is not mentioned after its encounter with the angel. Midrashic literature suggests that it was killed by the angel,¹² leaving Balaam no choice but to continue on foot. There may, however, be a narrative function in the idea that Balaam proceeded on foot without his donkey, since it emphasizes the contrast between the two. While that dumb animal paid heed to the angel and stopped in its tracks, Balaam persisted in his course of action and ignored the heavenly warning. The famous prophet and seer was indeed more foolish than his ass!

NOTES

1. *Entziklopediyah Mikra'it*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1963) p. 746. Cf. also Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979) p. 1046, number 8205, where it is explained as "smooth" or "bare." In their *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J.Brill, 1999) p. 1623, Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baum-

gartner and Johann J. Stamm understand the word to mean a barren hill.

2. Yehiel Tzvi Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Bamidbar* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1988) p. 290. Moskowitz does not indicate who the "others" are, this omission suggesting that such interpreters are not generally quoted in the *Da'at Mikra* series.

3. *Ha-Millon He-Ḥadash* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sefer, 1983) p. 1404, s.v. *shefi*.

4. *Konkordantziyah Ḥadashah la-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sefer, 1998), s.v. *shefi*.

5. The Vulgate attached the words *va-yelekh shefi* to the beginning of verse 4, as opposed to the Masoretic text, where they appear at the end of verse 3.

6. J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 674. He also notes the translation of Onkelos, 'alone'.

7. Vatican Neophyti 1 (Jerusalem: Makor ed., 1979) p. 320.

8. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 17, part 2 (CAD; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1992), s.v. *šēpu*, p. 294. I wish to thank Nili Samet, who was the first to translate *shefi* in Akkadian for me.

9. See Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), where *hummuru* (p. 120), *peṣsu* (p. 273), and *subbutu* (p. 340) are all stated to mean "lame" or "crippled." However, *šēpu* has the meaning of "foot," "on foot," or even "foot of a mountain," not an injured foot (p. 367).

10. See Adin Steinsaltz, who follows Rashi in his interpretation of Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, suggesting that *shofi* is the highest bone in the leg.

11. See *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, p. 367.

12. *Bamidbar Rabbah* (Vilna ed.), Balak 20; *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), Balak, *siman* 14; *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Balak 247 (2005).



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THE FIFTIETH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL BIBLE CONTEST FOR JEWISH YOUTH 5773

JOSHUA J. ADLER

This year's International Bible Contest for Jewish Youth in Jerusalem was unique: for the first time in over twenty years, there was a tie in the contest between Elior Babian aged 16 from Bet Shemesh, Israel and Yishai Eisenberg, aged 15 from New Jersey. Some felt that Yishai should have been declared the winner prior to the fourth round because when the fourth round was called for, all past scores were erased and both Elior and Yishai answered a series of thirteen questions correctly thus resulting in a tie. This meant that this year there was not one but two Bible champions called in Hebrew *Hatanei Hatanakh*.

Despite the world economic crisis, the contestants represented 26 countries and totaled 54 individuals from overseas. There were separate contests earlier for both Israeli and Diaspora youth which selected those who would participate in the grand contest on Independence Day which is televised live.

There were several new speakers at the *Hidon* this year such as the new Minister of Education, Rabbi Shai Piron and the new chairman of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein. The film clips, on which the first sixteen questions were based, were both educational and entertaining. As in every year the contestants were treated to tours of the country and meetings with important leaders including Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The annual *Hidon* is sponsored by the IDF chief education officer, the IDF rabbinate, the Ministry of Education, the Jewish Agency, the Keren Kayemet (JNF) and representatives of the Jewish Bible Association. Jewish communities around the world are urged to prepare pupils for local Bible contests wherever they are held or to prepare pupils privately so that they can become future participants in the international *Hidon*. Pupils may study the Bible either in Hebrew or their native languages. For further information about how to involve pupils in the international contest contact a Jewish Agency representative www.jafi.org.il

Joshua J. Adler, formerly Rabbi of Chizuk Emuna Congregation in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has lived in Jerusalem since 1972, and serves as managing editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.

BOOK REVIEW

The JPS Bible Commentary – Ruth, Commentary by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Jewish Publication Society, 2011, 178 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

Appealing to scholars and laypersons alike, JPS's Bible Commentary on the Book of Ruth follows a similar pattern to the volumes dealing with Jonah, Esther, and Ecclesiastes published earlier. Here again, scholarly and traditional Jewish materials are combined, providing a contemporary commentary on Ruth, for which the JPS is to be commended. There are 75 pages of introduction, as well as a further 100 or more pages of the actual text in Hebrew and English translation, with a running commentary at the bottom of each page.

The authors of this wonderful volume, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky, both highly respected women scholars, offer the reader a rich review of this *megillah*, the only book in the entire biblical corpus aside from Esther that is named for a woman. The JPS Commentary on Ruth received the 2011 National Jewish Book Award.

Sadly, Frymer-Kensky died while working on this joint project. She did leave extensive notes that form the basis for the first two chapters, as well as some notes for the Introduction. Eskenazi's voice is heard in chapters three and four. Eskenazi also wrote the full Introduction with the exception of the subsection on *Hesed in the Bible* (see p. xlvihi).

JPS wisely chose two eminently (!) qualified women scholars to author this book, having selected Adele Berlin to write the comparable volume on Esther more than a decade ago. Women have insights different to those of men. In the past, many Jewish commentaries (written by men) spoke for all of Judaism, women and men alike; but women approach the text in a unique manner, reflecting their own feminine world view and experiences. It is, very likely, a woman's outlook that highlights, for example, the candid discussion of the "sexually charged atmosphere" created by "Naomi's provocative instructions" in Ruth 3:4, and the comments regarding a single woman's economic survival

David J. Zucker, PhD, BCC, recently retired as Rabbi/Chaplain and Director of Chaplaincy at Shalom Care in Aurora, Colorado. He is the author of Israel's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 1994); American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction (Jason Aronson/Rowman and Littlefield, 1998). His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005). See: www.davidjzucker.org.

in biblical times implied in 4:15. At the close of the Introduction, Eskenazi refers to numerous contemporary women writers who have brought their scholarship and sensibilities to bear on the Book of Ruth.

Readers might take the time to go through the extensive Introduction, or begin with the running commentary, or choose a combination of the two.

Each chapter begins with a paragraph overview, followed by a three-sentence outline with appropriate verse numbers. These divisions help to define for the reader the direction of the chapter itself. In addition, as one reads through the commentary, each of these chapter divisions features additional introductory explanations for the section it addresses.

In the running commentary for each verse in the Book, the authors offer a variety of insights. They reflect on the plain meaning of the text and often add context to facilitate a better understanding of its meaning in the environment of the ancient Near East. They may also provide midrashic commentary and suggest connections to material that will appear later in the story or in other parts of the Bible. Proper names are analyzed, as well as the use of specific verbs.

This volume is informative and enjoyable to read. It often uses alliteration to underscore central ideas. Eskenazi describes the Book of Ruth as a "story [that] is simple but never simplistic" (p. xvi), a work that is filled with "*hesed* and *hutzpah*," telling of "a journey from famine to fullness, from futility to fertility" (p. xv); and later there is a section on "the relation and relevance to King David" (p. lx). Chapter 2 is titled "Finding Favor and Food in the Field" (p. 27), while the title of Chapter 4 is "Redemption and Restoration" (p. 69).

Commentaries reflect the age in which they are written, and the audience for which they are intended. Although, as noted below, many other topics are covered, this book prominently features sections on the issues of Intermarriage and Conversion, as well as Feminist Interpretations, which make this work special. Likewise, the commentary reflects on both Jewish and general scholarship concerning the Book of Ruth. Eskenazi notes that this particular biblical work has become "recognized as a spiritual source for contemporary women and men as a sophisticated contribution to understanding the dynamics of class, gender, and ethnicity, both in the past and the present" (p. lxv).

The Introduction itself is worth the price of the book. The categories are: Authorship and Date; Genre/Style; Ruth's Place in the Canon; Ruth's Rela-

tionship to Other Biblical Books; Ruth and Shavuot; Background Issues and Themes; Levirate Marriage; The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth; Inter-marriage; Conversion; The Status of the Moabites; *Hesed*; The Theology of the Book of Ruth; Redemption in the Bible; Pre-modern Rabbinic Interpretations; Later Jewish Interpretations; and Contemporary Readings. In this last category there are subsections on Feminist Interpretations and Modern Jewish Interpretations.

This is a welcome addition and complement to both traditional and more academic scholarship on the Book of Ruth.



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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

A recent paper (Arthur J. Wolak, "Ezra's Radical Solution to Judean Assimilation", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40:2, 2012, pp. 93-104) showed that the period of Ezra is the matrix out of which emerged the now established rule that Jewishness depends on having a Jewish mother or entering the community by means of conversion.

However, there were signs of a matrilineal policy long before Ezra. Although the criterion of Israelite identity in early times was patrilineal, based on *bet av* (the father's house) (Ex. 1:1, Num. 3:2), that rule was not firm or immutable. The matrilineal definition is foreshadowed when the Bible already speaks of not only a *father's* but a *mother's* house: e.g., in Exodus 1:21. God rewards women's piety by *making them houses*. Similarly, Rachel and Leah *built the house of Israel* (Ruth 4:11). This contrary view, the exact history of which cannot be pinpointed, led to a halakhic *midrash* which sees *your son* (i.e., grandson) in Deuteronomy 7:3-4 as the child of an Israelite mother. The son of a non-Israelite mother is not deemed *your son*. In time, the matrilineal rule was accepted by all halakhic schools of thought (TB *Kid.* 65b/68b; Maimonides, *Hil'khot Issurei Bi'ah* 15:4; *Shulhan Arukh, Even Ha-Ezer* 8:5). "House" is a metaphor for family or progeny, as pointed out by Hizkuni on Exodus 1:21. The compliment the Bible is paying to women is that through them the Jewish heritage is maintained, whereas pagan women (e.g., in Judges 3:5-6) affect it adversely. Especially in time of war, there must have been many widows whose responsibility it was both to look after the children and to keep them within Israelite culture.

Originally, there was a state of fluidity in which patrilineality and matrilineality operated side-by-side until there came a time of crisis in which the people were ready to recognize the negative influence of *foreign wives* and to support Ezra's rulings (10:2-4, 9:11) against *the daughters of strange gods*. The people now wished the *putting away* of gentile wives and their children to be done *according to the law* – perhaps the law about divorce procedures (Deut. 24:1-4) or, perhaps, the law against mixed marriage (Deut. 7:3). In excluding gentile wives and their children, Ezra claimed (9:11) to be following prophetic teaching, although he did not quote a precise source, and the

Sages did not list the negative status of gentile wives among Ezra's or the prophets' enactments.¹

Moore² finds a parallel in Greek history, citing Pericles' (495-429 BCE) restriction of Athenian citizenship to the child of an Athenian man and an Athenian woman. We do not know if Ezra (who lived at about the same time) saw this as a precedent; he presumably knew of it. Zeitlin³ thinks the ruling is a response to Sanballat's action in marrying his daughter to a son of the high priest (Neh. 13:28). According to Zeitlin, Judaism had to block the child of a non-Jewess from being a priest – or a Jew.

Matrilineality took time to become entrenched. By the period of the Mishnah (*Kid.* 3:12), it was clear that a child follows its mother's status. Commenting on the blessing, *The Lord make you as Ephraim and Manasseh* (Gen. 48:20), the Sages declared that the boys' mother, Asenath, was not a gentile but the daughter of Dinah, sister of Joseph.⁴

In the Roman period, there were many conversions and semi-conversions to Judaism and there needed to be a clear definition of Jewish status; otherwise, according to Schiffman, Judaism would have been swamped by the children of gentile Christian mothers.⁵

Raymond Apple
Jerusalem, Israel

NOTES

1. Z. H. Chajes, *The Student's Guide through the Talmud*, trans. & ed. J. Schachter (London: East and West Library, 1952) ch. 10.
2. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era.*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1927) p. 20.
3. Solomon Zeitlin, "The Offspring of Inter-marriage," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 51, part 2 (1960) pp. 135-140.
4. For notes and sources see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946) p. 38; vol. 5 (1947) pp. 336-7.
5. Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1985) ch. 2.

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