

## Authority and Validity: Why *Tanakh* Requires Interpretation, and What Makes an Interpretation Legitimate?

Moshe Sokolow

**Abstract:** The Bible requires interpretation (exegesis), but not all interpretation offered to the Bible is valid. The first half of this paper examines the criteria for authority and validity in Biblical exegesis, comparing the major schools of traditional, historical-philological, and literary interpretation. The second part comprises an attempt to compose a modern Orthodox commentary on Genesis 18, which, while rooted in traditional exegesis (*parshanut*), is yet responsive to the requirements of historical-philology and literary analysis.

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## Introduction

Simon Rawidowicz has written that interpretation “bridges the gap between past and present,”<sup>1</sup> and Gershom Scholem has called it “true growth and unfolding from within.”<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary Jewish student of the Bible cannot but feel some degree of alienation from a text which, whatever his proficiency in Hebrew, often reads like what the prophet Isaiah called “a tongue of mumblers”<sup>3</sup>

## The Bible Requires Interpretation

The first difficulty the interpretation of the Bible must confront and overcome is its own justification. In other words: Why interpret? Why not presume that the Bible, as the literary embodiment of God's design to communicate with man, says its piece bluntly and literally?

This question of the “nature of exegetical authority” is a prelude to the equally complex and challenging issue of “validity in interpretation.” That is, if we accept the premise that interpretation (which we shall also call “exegesis” or *parshanut*) is indeed in order, then what are the criteria according to which we can distinguish between valid and invalid

interpretations, let alone recommend one particular interpretation over another?

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*What are the criteria according to which we can distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations?*

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There are two approaches to the questions of authority and validity in interpretation. The first is based on the principles which underlie medieval Jewish biblical exegesis—for which there are also striking correspondences in the thinking of some contemporary hermeneuticists—and we have categorized these views as “traditional.” They stand in sharp contrast to the critical, philologically centered approach we have labeled “historical.”

## Why Interpret? The Traditional Response

Interpretation is a fact of linguistic and literary life. Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942) wrote: “It is the nature of language to have multiple meanings. Likewise the Torah, which was given in a human language.”<sup>4</sup> And in the contemporary words of Paul Ricoeur: “There is interpretation whenever there is multiple meaning”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Simon Rawidowicz, “On Interpretation,” *P.A.A.J.R.* 26 (1957), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Tradition and Commentary as Religious Categories in Judaism,” *Judaism* 15, 1 (1966), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 32:4.

<sup>4</sup> M. Zucker, ed., *Saadiab Gaon: The Commentary on Genesis* (Hebrew and Arabic) (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1984), translated from the Arabic Prolegomenon by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974), 13.

The alternative to interpretation, that is, taking everything literally, is expressly rejected in the Talmud. A *tanna* of the school of Rabbi Ishmael says: "Just as the rock is splintered by the hammer, so every divine utterance is divisible into seventy interpretations."<sup>6</sup> Similarly the *amora* Abayye says: "God speaks but once yet I hear two messages' [cf. Ps. 62:12]. Every biblical verse allows several meanings, and no two (different) verses will ever have the identical meaning."<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Judah goes further still, declaring that "Whosoever translates only according to the literal meaning of a verse is a charlatan."<sup>8</sup>

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Medieval biblical exegesis took its cue from the Talmud. As we have already noted, Sa'adiah was an early advocate of the recognition of the Torah's inherent multiplicity of meaning. So was his successor, Samuel ben Hofni, who cautioned would-be exegetes against confusing univocal and equivocal passages.<sup>9</sup> Rashi, too, in his Introduction to Song of Songs, addresses the question of single and multiple meanings. Writing about the seeming contradiction between the Talmudic principle "that Scripture cannot be purged of its literal sense,"<sup>10</sup> on the one hand, and the self-evident witness of prophetic allegory, on the other, he declares that the exegete "must interpret the allegory in

consonance with the established meaning of the verse in context."<sup>11</sup> In other words, even the allegorical component of Scripture—according to this view—is dependent upon a passage's literal meaning.

Multiple meanings clearly coexist. Traditional exegesis is aware of this polyvalence and labors to determine which meaning, in which circumstance, has greater validity. It does not consider the literal sense of a verse an adequate guide to interpretation in all circumstances.

### What Confers Validity?

Ricoeur writes that "Every reading of a text always takes place within a community, a tradition, or a living current of thought."<sup>12</sup> Tradition, as an arbiter of validity in interpretation, is another hallmark of medieval Jewish exegesis. Sa'adiah Gaon cautions the exegete that:

It is ever incumbent upon the rationalist to grasp the Torah according to the meaning most widespread and prevalent amongst the speakers of its language — for the purpose of every book is to deliver its message clearly to its reader — except for those places where sensory perception or rational inquiry contradict that prevalent meaning, or in the case that it contradicts another verse of unambiguous intent, or one of the prophetically inspired traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Rashi, similarly cognizant of the equivocal nature of Scripture, also uses tradition as the yardstick of interpretation. Rabbi Judah, after condemning

<sup>6</sup> מה פטיש זה נחלק לכמה ניצוצות, אף כל דבור ודבור שיצא מפי הקב"ה נחלק לשבעים לשונות (*Shabbat* 88b).

<sup>7</sup> אחת דבר אלקים שתים זו שמעתי

מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים, ואין טעם אחד יוצא מכמה מקראות (*Sanhedrin* 34a)

המתרגם פסוק כצורתו הרי זה בדאי, והמוסיף עליו הרי זה מחרף ומגדף

*Qiddushin* 49a (see n. 14 below). The translation of כצורתו as "the literal meaning" is based on *Tosafot* ad. loc., which renders it as: כמשמעו.

<sup>9</sup> Zucker, *Saadiab Gaon*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו

<sup>11</sup> On the term *לוגמא* in Rashi's commentary on Song of Songs, see Sarah Kamin, *Tarbiz* 62 (1983), 41-58.)

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 3.

<sup>13</sup> M. Zucker, *On Saadiab's Translation of the Torah* (New York: Feldheim, 1954), 231, translated from the Arabic by the author.

<sup>14</sup> See note 9 above. המתרגם פסוק כצורתו הרי זה בדאי, והמוסיף עליו הרי זה מחרף ומגדף

literal translation, added: "But whosoever would add to [the literal sense] reviles and blasphemes."<sup>14</sup>

Rashi comments on the seeming contradiction: "'Whosoever would add to it'— saying: since permission has been granted to add, I too shall add wherever I choose; 'reviles and blasphemes'—disgracing God, altering His words."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, someone who takes Scripture's multiplicity of meaning as an opportunity to invent new interpretations at will is not merely a charlatan but a blasphemer, a religious reprobate, because his sin is not committed against the language, per se, but against the way tradition has treated the language. And lest one protest: "But the 'authorized' *targum* [Aramaic translation] of Onqelos has precisely such proscribed 'additions,'" Rashi hastens to add: "Onqelos, however, did not add of his own accord, rather [the substance of his additions] was revealed at Sinai and subsequently forgotten until he reestablished it."<sup>16</sup> That is to say, tradition granted permission to Onqelos to effect other-than-literal translations, and without such authority his *targum* would be invalid.

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*Exegesis is authorized by the inherent polyvalence of the biblical text; validity is conferred through consonance with tradition.*

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In citing the Talmudic adage "it was forgotten and re-established,"<sup>17</sup> Rashi was appealing for the recognition of the unity within tradition of the text and its interpretation. Scholem describes this doctrine as follows: "Revelation comprises within it everything that will ever be legitimately offered to interpret its meaning,"<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> והמוסיף עליו—שבא לומר: הואיל וניתן רשות להוסיף, אוסיף גם אני בכל מקום שארצה. הרי זה מחרף—מבזה את המקום, משנה את דבריו.

<sup>15</sup> ואונקלוס כשהוסיף—לא מדעתו הוסיף, שהרי בסיני ניתן. אלא נשתכה וזחר ויסדו

<sup>17</sup> שכחום וחזרו ויסדום

<sup>18</sup> Scholem, "Tradition and Commentary," 18.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," 92.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies*, 39 (1978), 732.

<sup>21</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "Biblical Scholarship and Israeli Reality" (Hebrew), in Uriel Simon, ed., *Ha-miqra va-anahnu* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), 71.

and Rawidowicz observes that "equality of origin and time for the *Perush* with the text means absolute equality of value ... [which] is bound to lend the *Perush* an autonomy, a self-sufficiency *sui generis*."<sup>19</sup>

According to the traditional method, then, exegesis is authorized by the inherent polyvalence of the biblical text, and validity is conferred through consonance with tradition, which is seen as coeval with revelation itself. As Sandra Schneiders writes: "What constitutes the criterion of validity in exegesis? ... The exegete remains always under the judgment of the text and of the faith tradition ... It is possible for anyone of normal intelligence who operates within the structures of understanding of the faith community, and his or her own life experience, to grasp at least the basic meaning of the biblical text."<sup>20</sup>

### Authority and Validity: Historical Method

The historical method has been epitomized by Moshe Greenberg, albeit with serious reservations, as follows:

To date, Bible scholars see their principal task as penetrating beyond the text to its first form. The historical philological question is: 'How did the text evolve?' and the desired objective is to describe the process of its evolution ..., in the wake of the conclusions of the method, exegesis follows. The exegete (sometimes the textual scholar himself) interprets primarily the sifted original text, while what he has judged as an addition tends to be shunted off into a marginal note or, at best, dealt with in a section entitled: 'Additions by students and copyists'. In any event, these 'additions' are not required for the interpretation of the

message of the work, and by this means the character of the interpreted unit changes more or less.<sup>21</sup>

Historical philology, then, believes that if one (1) reconstructs an original Biblical text, (2) identifies its author(s), and (3) circumscribes the linguistic, literary, and cultural contexts, then one has determined the text's "original intent," and **that** is its interpretation. Anything else, according to this method, is not the recovery of original intent, but "superimposed interpretation"; that is, not *exegesis* (literally: reading out of a text) but *eisegesis* (literally: reading into a text). As E.A. Speiser put it:

Far more problematic than the integrity of the text is the accuracy of the transmitted meaning ... in course of time the content of the Bible became enveloped in layer after layer of superimposed interpretation; interpretations bequeathed by scribes and rabbis, ancient versions, the vocalizers of the standard (Masoretic) text, and—not the least formidable of all—the first standard version in the given Western tongue. Each of these accretions has served as a safeguard in some ways, but as a barrier in others, a barrier to the recovery of the original context.<sup>22</sup>

Notice, particularly, how the treatment of Scripture by the faith community, that very factor which validates interpretation according to the traditional method, is here denigrated as a "barrier." Nowhere, indeed, is the contrast between these two methods greater than in the issue of the so-called "original" intent, as opposed to that called "superimposed."

### The Contrast

Two questions present themselves given this contrast: (1) Which method can lay claim to

greater validity? and (2) Which method offers greater promise for religious education?

The first question can be rephrased, focusing on the aforementioned contrast, as: Does the biblical text have one original and recoverable intent, or is it necessarily multi-intentioned and dependent upon what has been called "the subsequent tradition of the believing community which created the book as Bible?"<sup>23</sup> Tradition would argue that even were we to presume that the author of any work of literature had one precise intention, the text, by itself, does not suffice for its retrieval. As I.A. Richards cautioned: "We have to remember... that what the writer meant is not to be simply equated with what he wrote."<sup>24</sup> With respect to biblical literature, moreover, the nature of its prophetic revelation orders us to contend with intentions other than those of the author.

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*Nowhere is the contrast greater than in the issue of "original" intent, as opposed to that called "superimposed."*

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Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, the *Hazon Ish*, believed that:

The prophet often received the intent alone, and often the words as well. However, his understanding of both the words and the intent was often only of the kind available to any scholar of the Torah, and was not uniquely prophetic. Thus it is conceivable that in the transmitted words there were additional intentions unrecognized even by the prophet himself.<sup>25</sup>

This is similar to the doctrine of the *sensus plenior*, or fuller sense of Scripture, which R.E. Brown defines as "that additional deeper meaning intended by God, but not clearly intended by the human author."<sup>26</sup> William

<sup>22</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Anchor Bible, 1964), lxiv.

<sup>23</sup> R.A.F. McKenzie, cited by Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics," 728.

<sup>24</sup> I.A. Richards, *Interpretation in Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, nd), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Cited by Yizhaq Klein, *Nevi'ei emet* (Benei Beraq, 1969), 158.

<sup>26</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary's Univ. Press, 1955), 92,

Braude, too, has taken note of this distinction, remarking that "Traditional interpreters [of *midrash*] deny the mathematico-mechanical outlook, because they believe in revelation, and hence in the polyphony of a text."<sup>27</sup>

Braude, in fact, calls the result of the historical method "unilinear *peshat*" and attributes it to three false premises:

False premise No. 1: We moderns really know Hebrew—in any event we know it better than [the Sages]. False premise No. 2: We have the means to recover the intent of the writer of Scripture. False premise No. 3: A great text such as Scripture, which even those who do not believe in revelation will admit that it indeed is, has one meaning, and one meaning only.<sup>28</sup>

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*Once the safety of objectively defined meaning is abandoned, what controls remain over subjectivity?*

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The historical-philological rebuttal is easily anticipated and approximated. Once the safety of objectively defined meaning is abandoned, what controls remain to be exercised over the ensuing subjectivity which passes for interpretation? The ancients and medievals, to their credit, did the best which could be expected of anyone lacking the tools of historical-philological investigation. For instance, in the absence of comparative Semitics they imagined that they could exchange rabbinic Hebrew with its biblical predecessor and, bereft of a tangible basis for cross-cultural

contrast, they employed the literary fiction of *midrash*. Speiser chides,

Later Hebrew is by no means identical with early biblical usage. Yet successive interpreters would tend to make the secondary usage retroactive. And because the Bible had become sacred Scripture, such anachronistic interpretations acquired a normative bearing of their own.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, with the expansion of our contemporary knowledge of biblical Hebrew—through the recovery of Hebrew texts and inscriptions of the biblical period, and through comparisons with related Semitic languages—and with the intensification of our current acquaintance with the cultural contexts of biblical civilization via comparative literature and archaeology, we are uniquely situated to perform the labor of historical interpretation denied to our predecessors.

Historical inquiry, then, posits the existence, for each biblical text, of a single original intention which can be retrieved via the proper implementation of archaeology and linguistics. Traditional inquiry, however, rejects the notion of a single original intention as inapplicable to the literature of prophetic revelation, due to the combined factors of its inherent multiplicity of meaning and its "fuller sense."<sup>30</sup> Historical inquiry, in a word, seeks the "objective" meaning of Scripture via a method decried by its detractors as "mathematico-mechanical,"<sup>31</sup> while traditional inquiry seeks the "subjective" meaning disparaged by its deprecators as "anachronistic."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> William Braude, "Midrash as Deep Peshat," in Sheldon R. Brunswick, et al., eds., *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica & Islamica, in honor of Leon Nemoy* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 1982), 32 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*.

<sup>30</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior*: "Thus, the continuity of the 'fuller sense' with the meaning of the human author and with the whole of tradition, constitutes a kind of criterion for validity in interpretation."

<sup>31</sup> So Braude, *Midrash*. Cf. Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation" (109): "Spinoza, whose preference of *peshat* is stimulated not only by his reaction against the Jewish tradition of interpretation, but also—and decisively—by the new mathematico-mechanical outlook which was the basis for his philosophy at large.

<sup>32</sup> The clash of "objective" and "subjective" meanings brings to mind the following comment by Stanley Fish: "William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essays on the affective and intentional fallacies (so called) ... plead a successful case for [the centrality of] the text by arguing, on the one hand, that the intentions of the author were unavailable and, on the other, that the responses of the reader were too variable. Only the text was both indisputably there and stable....The outcome of either fallacy ... is that [the text]

## The Need for Synthesis

Each approach, in its own way, is capable of alienating the contemporary religious reader from the Biblical text. Historical inquiry does so by overly emphasizing the text's remote origins; traditional inquiry does so by overly emphasizing its classical and medieval exegesis. A brief sampling of some modern thought on this subject highlights the respective problematics. Yehuda Elitzur, in an essay entitled "Faith and Science in Biblical Exegesis," offers the following critique:

A contemporary exegete is required, of course, to examine things in the light of contemporary knowledge....If he does so, then he is following in the footsteps of the ancients even if he disagrees with them in a thousand details. However, one who only copies the ancients, shutting his eyes to newly discovered facts and knowledge, is abandoning the ways of the ancients and is rebelling against them.<sup>33</sup>

Other scholars have been sharply critical of contemporary historical inquiry. Marvin Fox has decried "a kind of secularist fundamentalism that is equally insensitive to the fact that we are always dependent on and involved in processes of interpretation,"<sup>34</sup> and Brevard Childs has written that:

An almost insurmountable gap has arisen between the historical sense of the text, now fully anchored in the historical past, and the search for its present relevance for the modern age.<sup>35</sup> ...I am now convinced that the relation between the historical-critical

study of the Bible, and its theological use as a religious literature within a community of faith and practice, needs to be completely rethought.<sup>36</sup>

Without an established text, we interpret a will-o'-the-wisp. Without studying its linguistic and cultural background, we are wont to commit either gross anachronisms, or the kind of allegorical mayhem against which Rashi warned in his introduction to Song of Songs. To limit interpretation to that which the original author intended to convey to his original audience, however, is to ignore two fundamental characteristics of the Bible as Scripture: (1) that it exceeds the sum of its avowed prophetic intentions, and (2) that this "fuller sense" can be reconstituted only through the medium of tradition in its function as the faith community's indigenous and authentic "development in the understanding of revelation."<sup>37</sup>

As Moshe Greenberg has acknowledged:

We must hope that just as it is unimaginable to have a Bible scholar bereft of a fundamental knowledge of the ancient Near East, so it would be unimaginable to have a Bible scholar fundamentally ignorant of the 'Oral Law.' The knowledge of the ancient Near East is requisite to evaluate the place of the Bible in its cultural framework...while a knowledge of the Oral Law and of exegesis—apart from their value in deciphering the meanings of Scripture—is necessary for the evaluation of Biblical values.<sup>38</sup>

Must every exegete be a believer? There are both minimalist and maximalist positions.

itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear." (*Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980, 1). The centrality of the text is likewise championed by Meir Weiss who asks, succinctly, "as between the words of scholars and the words of the psalm, which shall we heed?" (*דברי החוקרים ודברי המזמור—דברי מי שומעים?* (מקרא), Jerusalem, 1967), 45, or English translation, *The Bible From Within: The Method of Total Interpretation*, Magnes Press 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Y. Elitzur, *Emet, dat u-madda* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1966), 132-133.

<sup>34</sup> Marvin Fox, "Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation," in *Modern Jewish Ethics* (Ohio: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1975), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Brevard Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture," in Herbert Donner, et al., eds., *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), 91-92.

<sup>36</sup> Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982 [NOTE: LOC catalogue says 1979]), 15.

<sup>37</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "Biblical Scholarship and Israeli Reality," 84.

According to Greenberg, "the basic requirement... is not faith, but understanding; not assent, but recognition of the profound issues which the Bible treats."<sup>39</sup> Sandra Schneiders, however, analogizes that "Faith plays a role in biblical hermeneutics not unlike that of talent and training in the listening to or performing of music. A fundamentally positive attitude is necessary if one is to enjoy the music at all; but the more musical one is, the greater the possibility of enjoyment."<sup>40</sup>

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*Must every exegete be a believer?*

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Must the exegete be an accomplished literary critic? Not necessarily. Schneiders writes that "anyone of normal intelligence can interpret Scripture, by combining his own life experience with tradition."<sup>41</sup> J. P. Fokkerman has said similarly, that if the Bible indeed speaks in human terms, it can speak to any good close reader who trusts the conjunction of his empathy with the text and his own experience.<sup>42</sup>

Among those experiences, the Bible exegete must count the unmediated encounter with the text. Edward Greenstein argues for "familiarity with the aesthetics of the Bible," which he describes as "training in experiencing of the text, so that the reader will become sensitive enough, on his or her own, to directly encounter it."<sup>43</sup> The Bible has been cherished by religionists as an inspired source of truth, and by students of the past as a primary historical source. Both

positions are valid, but there is something more to the Bible than this ...Far be it from me to say not to analyze the Bible. But in the long run, more is required of the religious person and the religious scholar.<sup>44</sup>

### **Involvement**

The key to the "direct encounter" is involvement. Greenstein writes:

When you are waiting for something to happen, when you have this expectation, you are involved in what is going on. You're constantly being enlisted in the creative process, because you, yourself are, in a sense, subconsciously creating together with the artist...This participation is a source of pleasure.<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Schwab, describing what he calls "rhetorical analysis," writes:

If a reader could have access to the alternatives from which an author thus chooses his key words, the structure of his key sentences, and his organization, he would have at hand a remarkable aid to interpretation....By bringing to bear on symbols and meanings the process of comparison....the reader could participate in a part of the act of authorship.<sup>46</sup>

In his study of Talmud "*learnen*" (study groups), Samuel Heilman makes the same observation: The excitement in such study is to uncover for

<sup>39</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "On Teaching the Bible in Religious Schools," in *Modern Jewish Educational Thought*, ed. D. Weinstein and M. Yizhar (Chicago: College of Jewish Studies, 1964), 79.

<sup>40</sup> Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics," 732.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>42</sup> J. P. Fokkerman, in personal conversation with the author, referring to the Talmudic adage *dibberah torah ki-leshon benei adam* ("the Torah speaks in human terms").

<sup>43</sup> Edward Greenstein, "Against Interpreting the Bible," *Ikka D'Amrei* (A Student Journal of JTSA), IV (1982), 30.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 27, 31.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 36. In conclusion Greenstein writes: "What I've tried to show you, or argue, is that the reading experience, or the hearing experience, cannot be reduced to a message or a particular set of data. The experience is the total and cumulative effect of what happens to you, what goes through your head, during the entire course of reading or listening." (*Ibid*, 38).

<sup>46</sup> Joseph J. Schwab, "Enquiry and Reading Process," in *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 154.

oneself the old truths...to feel as if one is oneself the pioneer. The traditional learner is by no means simply mimicking or mouthing the words of the past...he is dramatically possessed by the text and its world; yet to him its words and reasoning seem to be his own.<sup>47</sup>

**Epilogue:**

With these last few words, we have closed the hermeneutic circle begun in the Prologue in

praise of interpretation. We would like to close with Leon Roth's particularly felicitous definition of the interpretive process:

It is ultimately the determining of an ideal of life, the establishing of a preference among possible ends. It is the ordering of types of action in an ascending and descending scale of better and worse, an ordering which shapes the kind of life we choose to live...Interpretation thus becomes the gateway to life, and in this wide sense is synonymous with education.<sup>48</sup>

47 Samuel Heilman: *The People of the Book* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 65

48 Leon Roth. "Some Reflections on the Interpretation of Scripture." *The Montefiore Lectures* (London, 1956), 20-21.

# Genesis 18

## Tidings: Glad and Disconcerting

### Preview

“And Lot, also, who went with Avram...”:

The episode concerning Abraham and the glad tidings of impending birth is a pivotal link in the chain of circumstances initiated when God promised that his descendants will inherit the Promised Land (12:7). At the same time, the disconcerting tidings of imminent doom brings to denouement the story that began when Lot settled in Sodom (13:12).

The concurrence of these contrasting tidings is both propitious and ominous. Until he was vouchsafed the birth of a son to Sarah, Abraham’s closest kin was Lot. They refer to one another as “brothers” (13:8) and Abraham is moved by Lot’s capture (14:14) to risk his own life in his rescue. Were he to remain childless, to whom would the Promised Land revert? Could it, perhaps, revert to Lot?

Abraham’s commitment to Lot understandably is diminished with the birth of Ishmael and may have dissipated entirely with the subsequent tidings that he will soon have a son of his own. When informed shortly thereafter of Sodom’s impending destruction--and Lot’s implicit demise-- Abraham confronted a dilemma: Should he advocate for Lot? On the one hand, Lot had made his bed in Sodom and now would have to lie on it. On the other hand, he was kin. On the one hand, he was no longer indispensable for the fulfillment of the divine plan. On the other hand, he was, relatively speaking, a righteous man.

Abraham’s advocacy (cf. *infra.*, v. 23 ff.) for Lot and for the hypothetical righteous of Sodom distinguishes him in the realm of relationships with people (*bein adam le-haveiro*).

### A Guest is a Jewel on the Cushion of Hospitality

Whether Abraham’s three guests were literal or allegorical is a matter of celebrated controversy (see our commentary to vs. 1, 2).

Whichever the case, Abraham’s reaction to their appearance is startling: He extends his hospitality even at the expense of intruding upon his earlier divine visitor! No less startling is God’s reaction to the interruption: Rather than the comeuppance we might have anticipated, He patiently awaits Abraham’s conclusion of his convivial obligations before resuming conversation with him (see our commentary to v. 22, “and Avram yet stood before the Lord”).

Abraham’s reaction to the appearance of his guests distinguishes him in the realm of relationships with God (*bein adam la-maqom*).

### Translating the Text

We move now to the text, beginning with an independent translation.

Following the illuminating precedent of the Tafsir (Arabic translation) of Sa’adiah Gaon, we shall translate the Torah literally unless the literal sense falls afoul of any one of four conditions:

1. sense perception
2. reason
3. the literal sense of another passage
4. reliable tradition\*

\* Historically, the first three of these conditions had already been set by Muslim exegetes in their expositions of the Qur'an. The fourth was set by Sa'adiah himself and played a crucial role in his ongoing polemic against the Karaites, who rejected Talmudic-Rabbinic tradition, which they derided as "artificial" (מצות אנשים לומדה).

[For a rationale of tradition as a decisive factor in interpretation, see previous essay, "Authority and Validity."]

As the case was with the Sharkh (Arabic commentary) of Sa'adiah, the commentary serves primarily to justify and clarify the translation.

## Scene One:

### The Arrival and Welcome of the Guests

<sup>1</sup> God appeared to him at Elonei Mamre' while he was seated at the entrance to his tent at the heat of day. <sup>2</sup> He observed three men standing opposite him; he espied them and ran towards them from the tent entrance, prostrating himself to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said: 'Please, my lord; if I have found favor in your eyes do not pass me by. <sup>4</sup> Let some water be taken to wash your feet and recline beneath the tree. <sup>5</sup> I shall take a bit of bread for your satiation before you move on since you have, in any case, dropped in on your servant'. They replied: 'Do as you have promised.'<sup>6</sup> Abraham hurried to the tent, to Sarah, and said: 'Quickly! Take three measures of fine flour; knead it and bake loaves.'<sup>7</sup> Abraham then ran to the cattle, took a fine, tender calf and gave it to the serving-lad who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>He took cream, milk, and the calf he had prepared, placed it before

them and stood over them beneath the tree while they ate.

## Commentary

### Verse 1

**God appeared to him...**alternatively: 'God was seen by him' (Fox). The exact meaning of this verse is crucial to the controversy between Maimonides and Nahmanides surrounding the nature of Abraham's visitors. Maimonides (Guide 2:42) considers this phrase a typical introduction to a prophetic visionary experience, in which case verses 2 ff. are details of the vision that was initiated by God's appearance. Ergo, the "men" whom Abraham saw, fed and with whom he spoke, existed only in his prophetic imagination. Nahmanides considers the wealth of mundane detail too great to support a visionary experience. According to his interpretation, these celestial visitors assumed mortal form ("they gave the appearance of eating"), arguably in order to make their presence less formidable. Bekhor Shor, while accepting the Maimonidean view, insists that God appeared to him only after the three guests.

Elsewhere in traditional exegesis (cited ad. loc. by Rashi), God's appearance here is attributed to the immediately previous episode. By visiting Abraham while he was recovering from his circumcision, God, as it were, was engaging in the act of *biquq holim*; tending to inquiring after the well-being of the ill.

**at Elonei Mamre'**...literally, the oaks (OJPS and NJPS: terebinths) of Mamre'. Abraham already resided among the Amorite clans of Mamre' when Lot was taken captive by the Mesopotamian marauders (14:13). These were the "confederates" (*ba'alei berit*) who accompanied him on his rescue mission and for whom he retained a share of the spoils. In a sort of *déjà vu*, it is at the same location that Abraham will shortly hear of Lot's latest predicament and, again, attempt his rescue.

**while he was seated at the entrance to his tent...**in light of the traditional assumption (above) that Abraham was recovering from circumcision, the urge to proffer hospitality brought him from the recesses of his tent to the entrance. Elsewhere, Abraham's tent is depicted in the aggadah as having an entrance facing each of the four cardinal directions. It would be specious to argue at which of those ostensible entrances he was seated at this juncture.

**at the heat of day...**Qimḥi, whose approach to Scripture is heavily influenced by Maimonides, suggests that the heat caused Abraham to fall asleep—a precondition for a prophetic vision. According to the traditional view, the urge to proffer hospitality was greater than the inconvenience created by sitting out in the sun (a condition exacerbated, according to this approach, by his recent circumcision!). Bekhor Shor, in this fashion, suggests that high noon was the time at which wayfarers would stop to eat.

#### Verse 2

**He observed** ...literally: he raised his eyes and saw; this ubiquitous metaphor for observation belongs to a class of Biblical phrases known by the Latin term, hendiadys. From the Greek meaning 'one by two', it signifies the expression of one idea through the use of two words connected by a conjunction. It appears most frequently with nouns, such as *ger ve-toshev* (a resident alien) and *hesed ve-emet* (a true favor), somewhat comparable, in English, to the use of 'nice and warm' instead of 'nicely warm'.

**three men...** While they are called 'men' (*'anashim*) throughout this episode (18:16, 22; 19:5, 8, 10, 12, 16), they are twice called *mal'akhim* (19:1, 15), often translated 'angels', giving substance to the assumption of Nahmanides, inter. alia, that they were celestial beings.

In truth, however, 'angels' is a misnomer since it has taken on, in English, an almost compulsory sense of a celestial being equipped with wings,

halo and harp. The Hebrew *mal'akh* derives from the (presumed) verbal root l'k, which also produces the noun *mela'khab*, work or enterprise, and designates one who performs work (on another's behalf), i.e., a messenger, which is quite the definition of the Greek *angelos*, with which the Septuagint translates *mal'akh*. A key to distinguishing throughout the Torah between mortal and celestial messengers is provided by Targum Onqelos distinguishes throughout the Torah between mortal and celestial messengers. Whenever *mal'akh* can mean 'angel', it is rendered *mal'akha*; whenever it only designates a messenger, it is rendered *izgeda*.

Bekhor Shor, one of whose tendencies is polemical, emphasizes the mortality of the messengers as a way to counter Christian Biblical exegesis, which associated the three with the trinity. He (like Qimḥi) also cites a midrashic adage explaining that they appeared to Abraham, who was himself a prophet, they appeared as 'men', whereas to Lot, who was unaccustomed to prophecy, they appeared to be 'angels'.

Rashi (v. 4) identifies them (i.e., their mortal appearance) as Arabs (see *infra*).

**standing opposite him...**alternately: positioned above him. Qimḥi and Ibn Caspi cite 1 Samuel 22:7 to illustrate the use of this idiom to indicate relative positions (see also Genesis 28:13, referring to God's position on the ladder relative to Jacob).

**he espied them and ran towards them from the tent entrance...** Following the traditional mode, this magnifies Abraham's devotion to hospitality. He is 99 years old, recuperating from circumcision, and it is the heat of the day. He would have had to be extremely motivated in order to run.

**prostrating himself to the ground...**alternately: bowing. Why the subordination implicit in the prostration? The consensus of traditional exegesis is that he did

so in recognition of their elevated station and in order to persuade them to accept his hospitality.

#### Verse 3:

**He said: ‘Please, my lord...**alt: my lords; alt: my Lord. The ambiguity inherent in this form of address sustains the earlier ambiguity regarding the specific nature of the guests and just how much Abraham knew—or surmised—about them. In light of the plural form of address in the first part of the sentence (*adonay*) as opposed to the singular forms of the continuation and the close (*‘einekha, ta`avor, `avdekeha*), three interpretations avail themselves:

He was addressing them all as mortals and “my lords” is an honorific consistent with his earlier attempt to secure their visit by running towards them and prostrating himself before them (see *supra*).

He was addressing but one of them (Rashi: the most senior one), and it remains an honorific and consistent with the theme of hospitality.

He was addressing The LORD, consistent with the view that this episode began with a prophetic vision.

**if I have found favor in your eyes do not pass me by...** Our understanding of Abraham’s request depends upon our choice of among the three aforementioned possibilities. If addressing the guests (either as mortals or angels), he is requesting them to accept his hospitality rather than continue on their way. If addressing God, he is asking Him—as it were—to tarry while he extends his hospitality to the men, rather than departing from him anon.

Rabbinic tradition takes the address and request in the last-mentioned sense, concluding thereby that “extending hospitality is greater even than receiving the divine presence” (*Shabbat* 127a). [To sustain this interpretation, however, one is obliged to engage in some homiletical legerdemain, to which we shall refer *infra*, v. 22.]

#### Verse 4:

**Let some water be taken to wash your feet...**Two anomalous features in this verse are the passive form “be taken,” and the intimation that only the feet would be washed. The passive indicates that it was not Abraham’s intention to draw the water himself; otherwise he would have said “I will take some water.” As for singling out the feet for washing, Rashi explains that Abraham perceived the three angels as “Arabs who worshipped the dust on their feet” and he wanted them to cleanse themselves of this idolatry before eating.

**and recline beneath the tree...**alt: beneath a tree. Since the episode begins with Abraham situated in “the oaks” (*‘elonei*) of Mamre’, he could have been referring to a specific tree or to the trees in general. Either way, it is noteworthy that he pointedly does not invite them into the tent itself, probably because that was Sarah’s private domain (see, *infra*, v. 9).

#### Verse 5:

**I shall take a bit of bread for your satiation before you move on...**While Abraham only offers bread, a staple, he also prepares veal, a delicacy, leading our Sages to proclaim him to be a man “who spoke but a little yet performed a lot” (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 1:13).

**since you have, in any case, dropped in on your servant...** Completing his case for hospitality, Avraham works the “serendipity” angle: As long as they are already present, what harm could there be in abiding?

**They replied: ‘Do as you have promised’...**literally: as you have spoken. The stem d-b-r, to speak, often has the connotation of “giving one’s word” (see Numbers 23:19).

#### Verse 6:

**Abraham hurried to the tent, to Sarah and said:** ...One might have anticipated the reverse sequence, placing Sarah before the tent. If our

earlier surmise (see end of v. 4) is correct, however, the tent and Sarah become somewhat interchangeable. We shall have more to say on this apropos of v. 9.

**‘Quickly! Take three measures of fine flour; knead it and bake loaves’...**By indicating the amount of flour, Abraham conveys to Sarah the number of guests for whom provision was to be made.

Verse 7:

**Abraham then ran to the cattle...**This is the second time Avraham is described as running (see v. 2). Two possibilities suggest themselves: One, that he was anxious lest the guests change their minds and depart. Two, that he always performed hospitality with alacrity.

**took a fine, tender calf...**With all the archaeology and ancient literature available, it is still difficult to determine whether the choice of veal signaled the rule of hospitality or an exception.

**and gave it to the serving-lad who hastened to prepare it...** The transfer of the responsibility for the actual preparation of the meat is no different from that of the bread. Abraham was the host and neither chef nor baker. The identity of “the serving lad” (*na`ar*) is a tease. Simple, straightforward exegesis (called *peshat*) dictates that his anonymity implies insignificance. The *aggadah*—never forestalled by simplicity—presumes to know his precise identity: Yishmael. This pseudo-identification returns (to either enlighten or perplex us) at the close of this *parashah* when Abraham is accompanied to the binding of Isaac (*‘Akeidah*) by two equally anonymous serving-lads (22: 3).

Verse 8:

**He took cream, milk, and the calf he had prepared, placed it before them ...**The

dissonance between this menu and traditional Jewish religious practice—forbidding dairy and meat at the same meal—poses an obvious question. Two explanations predominate among the commentators. One: Before the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, such practices were not prohibited. The problem with this interpretation, however, is the traditional insistence that Abraham nevertheless observed the entire law, including even some of its rabbinical strictures (see Rashi on 26:5). Two: The menu was intended for his guests whom—as we indicated earlier (v. 4)—he mistook for Arabs. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that a strict application of Jewish law prohibits not only the consumption of dairy and meat together, but even the derivation of any benefit from such an admixture. Abraham, therefore, would have been constrained from serving it as well as from partaking of it.

Another, simpler, explanation exists: On the syntactically reasonable assumption that the subject of “he took” is the same as the subject of “he had prepared,” the entire problem evaporates. It was the serving-lad who was entrusted with preparing the meat (see the previous verse), and it must have been that selfsame serving-lad who took the milk and cream—quite possibly without Abraham’s foreknowledge—and placed it before the guests.

**and stood over them beneath the tree while they ate...**Who stood over them? While the context implies that it was Abraham, the syntax—as just explained—indicates that it was the serving-lad. The resolution can be obtained by a closer examination of the phraseology. Whereas in v. 2 the relative position of Abraham and the guests was conveyed by the phrase “standing opposite” (*nitzqvim `alav*), the text here utilizes the phrase “stood over” (*‘omeid `aleihem*), which often conveys a distinct hint of standing in service (see 24:30).