



The Tanach Revolution: Reclaiming Torah, or Trojan Horse for Secularism?

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1. Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Over the last few generations we have witnessed a heartening phenomenon: a renaissance of Tanakh (Bible) study amongst Jewry in general, and in the battei midrash of the Religious-Zionist public in particular. After hundreds of years during which Tanakh study occupied no place of any significance in the curricula of yeshivot and other educational institutions, it has now become an integral component of every stream within the Israeli educational system. The return to Tanakh study has also included a return to engagement with the "peshat" – the plain or literal meaning of the text – and has led to the exploration of profound and fascinating new layers of the text. This process is, of course, related to the process of the return of the Jewish people to its land, which has led to a broadening of the interest in the concrete and material aspects of the Bible, with hikes through different parts of the country and familiarity with the archaeological remains of the past.

2. Literary Study Of Biblical Narrative: Introduction (I) On the Subtextual Reading of Biblical Narratives: By Rav Dr. Yonatan Grossman <http://www.etzion.org.il/en/introduction-i-subtextual-reading-biblical-narratives>

...All students of literature, including students of biblical literature, know that a literary text can be examined at different levels and different depths of meaning.

Hiding the message of the story has some clear advantages....:

1. Hiding the message in a story allows the readers to become full partners in the process of interpreting the narrative and in bringing out its meaning...
2. More important than this is the ideology which is at the basis of this subtextual method. The idea that a sequence of events can be explained on different levels, that it is possible not only to tell a story in its own right, but to accompany it with subtle concepts, carries within it a religious message which is intimately connected to the meaning of the narrative: that reality, in and of itself, demands explication and thoughtful analysis because real events may have a significance beyond what is readily apparent.

3. <http://www.etzion.org.il/en/introduction-ii-legitimacy-literary-reading-bible>

A large part of the Bible is written as narrative – not just marginal or insignificant biblical passages, but passages that are foundational to our nation and its culture, including the exodus from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai. This means that the reader and commentator must use methods of literary analysis in order to understand the full meaning of these narratives and others. Even though this may seem obvious, for many years it was not clearly delineated

Interpretations that Differ from Chazal

1. Mishna, Sanhedrin Perek Chelek

ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה ואין תורה מן השמים ואפיקורוס ר"ע אומר אף הקורא בספרים החיצונים

And these have no share in the World-to-Come: One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an *epikoros*, Rabbi Akiva says: Also included in the exceptions are one who reads external literature...

2. Sanhedrin 100b

תנא: בספרי מינים. רב יוסף אמר: בספר בן סירא נמי אסור למיקרי.

The Sages taught: These are books of heretics. Rav Yosef says: It is also prohibited to read the book of ben Sira.

3. Rif, Sanhedrin 19b

תנא בספרים שפירשו התורה נביאים וכתובים ע"פ דעתם ולא סמכו על מדרש חכמים כי בדבריהם צד מינות וכ"מ שפקרו המינים אמרו חכמים תשובתן בצידן ואפילו דברי חכמים [טובים] אסור לקרותם

These are the books that explain the Torah, Neviim and, and Ketuvim according to their own opinions and do not rely on the interpretations of the sages, for in their words are an aspect of heresy, and wherever the Minim broke off, the Sages said that the text provides the response. Even if the wise [good] words are forbidden to read.

- Probably Karaites. Could be limited to Halacha, through the inclusion of Nach indicates perhaps not.
- In the Mossad HaRav Kook publication, all that appears is תנא בספרי צדוק

4. Shabbat 63a

אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו א"ר כהנא כד הוינא בר תמני סרי שנין והוה גמירנא ליה לכוליה הש"ס ולא הוה ידענא דאין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו עד השתא

A verse cannot be fully removed from its simple understanding. R' Kahane said: When I was 18, I had learned all of Shas and I did not know of this concept until now.

5. Rashbam, Bereishit 37:2

וגם רבנו שלמה אבי אמי מאיר עיני גולה שפירש תורה נביאים וכתובים נתן לב לפרש פשוטו של מקרא, ואף אני שמואל ב"ר מאיר חתנו זצ"ל נתווכחתי עמו ולפניו והודה לי שאילו היה לו פנאי היה צריך לעשות פרושים אחרים לפי הפשטות המתחדשים בכל יום.

R' Shlomo [Rashi], my mother's father, light of the Exiles, who explained Torah, Prophets, and Writings, also strived to explain the simple understanding of the Written Torah. Even I, Shmuel ben R' Meir z"l, argued with and before him [Rashi] and he acknowledged to me that if he had the time he would have been required to write other explanations according to the understandings that are brought out each and every day.

- While we tend to think of Rashi as a “Midrashic Commentary”, he is actually less reliant on Midrash than many of the earlier Ashkenazi commentaries. And his students are even more radical “pashtanim”.

6. Ibn Ezra, Introduction to Torah

ובעבור הדרש דרך הפשט איננה סרה, כי שבעים פנים לתורה, רק בתורות ובמשפטים ובחקים, אם מצאנו שני טעמים לפסוקים, והטעם האחד כדברי המעתיקים, שהיו כולם צדיקים, נשען על אמתם בלי ספק בידים חזקים. וחלילה חלילה מלהתערב עם הצדוקים, האומרים כי העתקתם מכחשת הכתוב, והדקדוקים. רק קדמונינו ה' אמת, וכל דבריהם אמת וד' אלהים אמת ינחה את עבדו בדרך אמת:

The way of *pesbat* will not step aside for *derash*, for the Torah has seventy faces, however, when it comes to laws, statutes and rules, if we find two ways to understand a verse, and one of the ways is in line with that of the Sages, for they were all pious, we will rely on the truth of their assertions, since without doubt they are reliable (lit. the have strong arms). Heaven forbid that we join with the Sadducees who say that the Sages' interpretation contradicts Scripture. Rather all their words are truth, and the Lord G-d is truth, and will lead his servant along the path of truth.

7. Rashbam, Introduction to Mishpatim [Good example re: Tefillin, and below]

ידעו ויבינו יודעי שכל כי לא באתי לפרש הלכות אעפ"י שהם עיקר, כמו שפירשתי בבראשית כי מיתור המקראות נשמעין ההגדות וההלכות, ומקצתן ימצאו בפירושי רבינו שלמה אבי אמי זצ"ל, ואני לפרש פשוטן של מקראות באתי. ואפרש הדינין וההלכות לפי דרך ארץ. ואעפ"כ ההלכות עיקר כמו שאמרו רבותינו הלכה עוקרת [מקרא]:

Wise people, you should know and understand that I have not come to explain the [practical] halakhot, even though they are the most important. As I explained in Genesis, the halakhot and aggadot are learned from extra [words or letters] in the text, and you will find some of these in the commentaries of my maternal grandfather, Rashi. However, I have come to explain the simple meaning of the verses. Thus I will explain the laws and the halakhot according to common sense. Nevertheless, the halakhot are of primary importance, as our Rabbis said: “Halakha can uproot Scripture.”

8. Rashbam to Bereishit 1:5

אין כתיב כאן ויהי לילה ויהי יום אלא ויהי ערב, שהעריב יום ראשון ושיקע האור, ויהי בוקר, בוקרו של לילה, שעלה עמוד השחר. הרי הושלם יום א' מן ה' ימים שאמר הק' ב' הדברות, ואח"כ התחיל יום שיני, ויאמר אלהים יהי רקיע. ולא בא הכתוב לומר שהערב והבקר יום אחד הם, כי לא הצרכנו לפרש אלא היאך היו ששה ימים, שהבקר יום ונגמרה הלילה, הרי נגמר יום אחד והתחיל יום שיני:

It does not say “it was night and it was day”, but “it was evening”, [meaning] the first day passed and the light set, “and it was morning”, the ending of the night, for the dawn broke. One day of the six days mentioned in the Ten Commandments was completed. Afterwards the second day began, and G-d said “Let there be sky.” The verse is not coming to tell us that evening and morning constitute one day, for we do not need to explain anything but how the six days were, for with the coming of the morning the night was over – thus one day was completed and the second day begun.

9. Ibn Ezra, Iggeret HaShabbat

והנה זה הפירוש מתעה כל ישראל, במזרח ובמערב גם הקרובים גם הרחוקים, גם החיים גם המתים, והמאמין בפירוש הקשה הזה ינקום ה' נקמת השבת ממנו, והקורא אותו בקול גדול תדבק לשונו לחכו, גם הסופר הכותב אותו בפירוש התורה זרועו יבוש תיבש ועין ימינו כהה תכהה.

This commentary is misdirecting all of Israel, the east and the west, the near and the far, the living and the dead. Those who believe this difficult commentary – G-d will avenge the vengeance of the Shabbat upon them. Anyone who reads it aloud – his tongue will stick to his palate. Any scribe who writes it as a comment on the Torah, his arm will dry and his right eye will go blind, but for the rest of Israel there will be light.

10. Rabbi Tzvi Tau

Some people think we can approach the Bible with our human intellect, removed from all holiness and faith, with a dry, secular, academic approach where the scholar stands above the material he is studying. The scholar determines what should be brought close and what should be pushed away... Rav Kook compares this to the distant past, when they would look at the moon without a telescope. The moon is very far from us, and because it is so far, people who looked at it with the naked eye thought that the moon is smiling or winking, that it has a person's face, etc. They would worship the moon, sacrifice to it, speak to it, and why would they do all of this? Because of the great distance... So too regarding the Holy Writings: We are so far away from prophecy, that when we look at it we just read ourselves into it – our intellect, our opinions, our petty concerns. It is like looking at the moon without a telescope! Rav Kook says, what is our “telescope?” What will allow us to bridge the great distance? It is faith... Even though we are not prophets, we are privileged to have Chazal, who were closer to prophecy... This is crucial to

know, that via Chazal we can see more deeply...When you look at the Bible with your own two eyes, it is like looking at the moon without a telescope – you don't see the moon at all, just yourself and your own imagination

Interpretations that Find Sins in the Avot

11. Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnat R. Aharon (Trans. R. Nathaniel Helfgot)

When one teaches students a section dealing with the actions of the *Avot*, one must explain to them that we are not speaking about regular human beings who have character traits and desires. Rather, we are discussing individuals of whom we can in no way understand their level, people devoid of all human desire and internal will, and, just as we have no criteria by which to evaluate angels, so too, we have no way of evaluating and appreciating the level of the forefathers.

12. Talmud Shabbat 56a

א"ר שמואל בר נחמני אמר ר' יונתן כל האומר דוד חטא אינו אלא טועה

R' Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R' Yochanan: Any who says that David sinned is merely mistaken.

13. Talmud Shabbat 10b

לעולם אל ישנה אדם בנו בין הבנים שבשביל משקל שני סלעים מילת שנתן יעקב ליוסף יותר משאר בניו נתקנאו בו אחיו ונתגלגל הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים

A person should never favour a child, for the small amount of good wool that Yaakov added to Yosef's portion caused his brothers to envy him and which then precipitated the descent to Egypt.

14. Ramban Bereishit 16:6 regarding Sarah's treatment of Hagar

חטאה אמנו בענוי הזה, וגם אברהם בהניחו לעשות כן, ושמע ד' אל עניה ונתן לה בן שיהא פרא אדם לענות זרע אברהם ושרה בכל מיני הענוי:

Our mother sinned in afflicting her. Avraham did as well, in letting her do this. G-d heard her affliction and gave her a son who would in turn afflict the descendants of Avraham and Sarah in many different ways.

15. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Torah and General Culture: Congruence and Conflict

Advocates of hagiographic *parshanut*, which portrays the central heroic figures of scriptural history as virtually devoid of emotion, can only regard the sharpening of psychological awareness with reference to Tanach with a jaundiced eye. But for those of us who have been steeped in midrashim, Nahmanides, and *HaEmek Davar* - in a tradition, that is, which regards our patriarchal *avot* and their successors as very great people indeed, but as people nonetheless, and which moreover sees their greatness as related to their humanity-enhanced literary sensitivity can be viewed as a significant boon.

16. *Hamevaser 2000*, "Imitate the Ramban, Not the Professors." Interview with Asher Friedman, accessible at www.atid.org in the resources link under the "Writings of Rabbi Shalom Carmy: The On-Line Library."

At the same time we must be on guard against a shallow this approach where the genuine awe and respect that we feel toward the *avot ha-umot* is compromised by cheap psychobabble or tendentious readings. Striking this optimum balance between honesty to the text, the sources, and the very religious message of the text and maintaining an appropriate sense of reverence and respect for biblical heroes is no easy task...

One reason that people shrink the larger than life personalities of *Tanakh* to pop-psychology size is that they are accustomed to treating themselves the same way. What characterizes pop-psychology? Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life. This is not the way I think of myself; it is not the way I think of you. It is not the way one should think about any human being created uniquely in the image of G-d. Once people see nothing wrong in entertaining secular conceptions of themselves, once they take for moral and psychological insight the tired idiom of the therapeutic, it's no wonder that they are tone-deaf to the grandeur of the *Avot* and *Immahot*.

From Non-Traditional Sources?

17. Rabbi Tzvi Tau, Tzadik B'Emunato Yichye

One who does not believe in the Divine origin and sublimity of the words, that they all flow from Divine truth that is infinite, absolute and eternal – one who lacks this faith will not understand the holy Scriptures whatsoever. All of his analyses, all of his investigations, all of his theories, and all of his "discoveries" fall into the category of nonsense...

When all these ideas are missing, when humility and self-effacement are lacking, when these elements are absent, come the scholars – Jews or gentiles, it makes no difference - and search through the holy Scriptures. They raise objections, they erase, they distort, and they emend; they suggest theories, they demonstrate creativity, they present novel ideas – what is all this to us? How are we connected to them? We occupy ourselves in the truth of the Torah, we engage ourselves in the holiness of the Torah. One who lacks both the beginning and the end – there is no point in talking to him at all!

18. Rambam, Introduction to Shemonah Perakim

ושמע האמת ממי שאמרה.

Accept the truth from he who says it.

19. R. Yosef Ibn Akinin, Commentary to *Shir Ha-Shirim*: (Tran. R. Nathaniel Helfgot)

We find in the books of R. Hai Gaon that he made recourse to the words of the Arabic scholars...and made use of the Quran...and such was the custom of R. Saadyah before him in his Arabic commentaries...and in this regard the Nagid describes in his book...after citing many comments of the Christian scholars that R. Matzliach b. Albazek...told him upon his arrival in Bagdad...that one day they were discussing the verse “*Shemen Rosh el Yani Rosh?*” [Ps. 141:6] in the Yeshiva and a debate ensued as to its meaning and R. Hai directed R. Matzliach to go to the Catholic [priest] of the Christians and ask him what does he know about the meaning of the verse, and it was evil in his eye, and when R. Hai ז”ל saw that R. Matzliach was distraught over this, he reprimanded him and said that the forefathers and the early pious ones who are for us exemplars would inquire members of other faiths about the meaning of words and interpretations.

Archeology and Ancient Near East

20. Ramban changes opinion of places when he came to Israel.

21. Sometimes it can support traditional interpretations (ex *bein einecha*)

Is this Abandoning the Mesorah?

22. Nechama Leibowitz: One must first study *Humash* just as Rashi did, without any Rashi on the bottom!

23. Literary methods can uncover the meaning of Midrashim/Meforshim. Also, there are multiple levels of study in Torah!

24. Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, Fear of G-d: The Beginning of Wisdom and the End of Tanakh Study

A few years ago, a friend of ours was in miluim (reserve duty in the idf) in early December. We invited his wife and children to eat with us on Shabbos morning, which was parshat Vayishlach. During the meal, the mother requested that I discuss the parsha with her girls, since her husband usually did so. I obviously obliged and began telling the story of the meeting between Yaakov and Esav in a manner that seemed to me most appropriate for a second grader. As I was reaching the climax and began to dramatically recount the story of Esav breaking his teeth as he attempted to sink them into Yaakov’s neck, I noticed the look of shock on the mother’s face. Upon inquiring whether I had committed any grave error, I received the following reply: “*Anachnu,*” she sternly told me, “*lomdim peshuto shel mikerat!*” (We learn the simple meaning of the text!)

The story of the broken teeth is, of course, a famous midrash that features prominently in *Chazal*’s interpretation of this episode. Coupled with the opposing opinion recorded alongside it that Esav kissed Yakov wholeheartedly, it is also an important debate regarding the ambivalent relationship underlying the meeting of the two brothers. As the issue at hand is *Tanakh* and *yirat shamayim* and not *psbat* vs. *drash* (the literal meaning vs. homeletics), let us set aside the (narrow-minded) assumption that such a midrash does not contribute to our understanding of the *psbat* and the interpersonal dynamics at work in this charged narrative and dwell upon the implications of the story from the *yirat shamayim* perspective.

Broadly speaking, Rashi’s interpretation of the *Chumash*, with its integration of much *Aggadic* material, is much more colorful than the commentaries of Ramban, Ibn Ezra and others who focused upon the plain meaning of the text. Teeth fall out, lions take swipes at a *tzaddik* who doesn’t deliver their food on time, princesses’ arms are extended into the middle of the river, dreams are swapped by cellmates, giants survive the deluge by wrapping themselves around the ark and many other vivid details are integrated by Rashi into his commentary. Conversely, it is also true that Ramban offers a more sophisticated and nuanced reading of the human relationships under consideration that contrasts sharply with Rashi’s schematic and two dimensional approach. To put it differently, Ramban’s protagonists are much more “round” and dynamic as opposed to those of Rashi who are considerably more “flat” and fixed in their characters.

What, then, should we teach our children – Rashi or Ramban? Needless to say, any answer to the question of Rashi vs. Ramban must take into account various considerations, exegetical, didactic, philosophical and others as to their relative merit as commentaries that are not of our concern in this paper. However, it seems to me that there is a very basic truth in our preference for Rashi in the early grades, even if one accepts the premise that Ramban’s commentary captivates and appeals to a child’s imagination. Ramban may be sophisticated, but Rashi is vivid. The rationale behind the choice of the more colorful commentary is that our aim in teaching *Chumash* is first and foremost the achievement of a religious goal. ...

- RML notes that in Israel, the Religious Zionist community has gone to one extreme, while many schools in Chutz La’Aretz are at the other.

A second point that was raised by some of the participants regarding the use of Midrash was that it is perceived as a simplistic and fantastic text that will only invite ridicule and, therefore, the needs of the modern learner are better served by shelving these Midrashic passages as embarrassing secrets that do not warrant display. Indeed, the danger of too literal a reading of the Midrash exists and it is undeniable that many sincere learners in the past and present treat the Midrashic texts in too literal a manner that results in a simplistic text that belittles Chazal. Nevertheless, we must still utilize the Midrashim and not throw out the baby with the bath water. The world of the Midrash is extremely rich and evocative, if explored in depth and not taken in the narrow literal sense. No less a figure than the Rambam devoted considerable energy to refuting the literal approach to Midrash and its consequences; however, he did not simply disqualify Midrash but rather insisted that it should be understood figuratively.