How to Live with Messiness: Joshua Berman on Biblical Criticism



How can an Orthodox rabbi be a scholar of Biblical criticism? Can Biblical scholars determine the 'true Bible'? Enter Professor Joshua Berman. Prolific author and scholar, Rabbi Dr. Berman is no apologetic. He engages with Biblical criticism with honesty and erudition, and is a passionate critic of the excesses of scholarship.

In this week's Weekend Reader, we will consider one key critique of his thought: The ability to live with messiness. The Bible is a complicated work, and learning to live in humility with its complications can elevate all that study it. We will look at a case study in messiness—the topic of Biblical reformulations—in the hope of better understanding the Bible's complexity.

Learning to Live with the Messiness

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, economists were in a state of disarray. Much like the state of pollsters after the 2016 election, economists were stunned by their failure to anticipate such a major event occurring. *New York Times* and economist Paul Krugman suggested in his 2009 piece "How Did Economists Get It So Wrong?" that economists have been mislead by the

> "desire for an all-encompassing, intellectually elegant approach that also gave economists a chance to show off their mathematical prowess."

Seeking the grand narrative of economics has led economists to mistake truth for beauty, and redemption of economics can come only by learning to accept the less beautiful parts of economic realities, and "learn[ing] to live with the messiness." Rabbi Dr. Joshua Berman is fond of this phrase, and much of his academic project is an attempt at correcting what he thinks of as Biblical critics' inability to live with the messiness. Sigmund Freud posited that the modern era has presented three shocking blows to what were the constitutive foundations of the modern mind: the ideas of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud himself. In his words, from *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis:*

> "Humanity has in the course of time had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages upon its naive self-love. The first was when it realized that our earth was not the center of the universe, but only a tiny speck in a world-system of a magnitude hardly conceivable; this is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus, although Alexandrian doctrines taught something very similar.
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> The second was when biological research robbed man of his peculiar privilege of having been specially created, and relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him: this transvaluation has been accomplished in our own time upon the instigation of Charles Darwin, Wallace, and their predecessors, and not without the most violent opposition from their contemporaries.
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> But man's craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavoring to prove to the 'ego' of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind. We psychoanalysts were neither the first nor the only ones to propose to mankind that they should look inward; but it appears to be our lot to advocate it most insistently and to support it by empirical evidence which touches every man closely."

For believers in the Divinity of the Bible, the advent of Biblical criticism has presented another such challenge. The centrality of the Bible to the life of faith is fundamental, but this does not mean that the believer must bow before complexity in fear or faith. Like the lives it informs, the Bible is complex, and we should treat it as such, with humility and openness to its questions.

Biblical Reformulations: A Case Study in Living with Messiness

The Bible is a complicated work, and source-critical Biblical scholars often assume that in the face of the complex apparent contradictions in the Bible, one can determine the true, original text. One type of messiness is the question of architectural and historical records of accounts in the Torah.

Another type of messiness that has provided particular stimulation to Biblical critics is the reiterations and reformulations that fill the Bible. Considering this second area of critical 'messiness' and the critical Biblical studies that have emerged around it provides insight into the work of Professor Joshua Berman, and the ways Biblical criticism has changed over time.

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The Bible often reformulates a law or story that was stated earlier, frequently with key deviations. Why might it do this? Along with the multiple names that the Bible uses for God, some Biblical critics maintain these reformulations indicate a lack of coherence and unity in the Bible, and suggest multiple authors.

In a much-discussed article in Mosaic Magazine on *The Corruption of Biblical Studies*, Professor Berman traces the development of this critical legacy. In the earlier stages of Biblical criticism, scholars such as Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677) and Father Richard Simon of France (1638-1712) were convinced of the presence of multiple authors, but thought it impossible to argue which came first. In Father Richard Simon's words:

> What we have at present is but an abridgement of the ancient records, which were much larger, and those who made the abridgements had particular reasons which we cannot understand. It is better therefore to be silent in this subject . . . than to search farther into this matter and condemn by a rash criticism what we do not understand.

Later critics went further in their arguments, like one 19th century scholar who said that "the old Bible rise in the reconstructions of biblical criticism into a splendor and a glory greater than ever before." This stream of Biblical criticism, popular today, thinks it possible to confidently assert an originary text to the Bible, of which our Bible is based. In Berman's words, this is as unexacting as an attempt to "unscramble an egg." He says, taking fragments and literary analyses of one Bible and constructing an original Bible for which we have no manuscript is an act of pure theoretical creativity, and it would not pass in other disciplines.

So where did this come from? When did this inability for some Biblical critics to live with messiness emerge? Berman thinks that this type of criticism occurred in the wake of Isaac Newton's findings. In Berman's words, in *Mosaic*:

> Just five years after Simon's 1682 *Critical History of the Old Testament*, Newton was formulating the laws of motion and universal gravitation in *Mathematical Principles of Natural History*. The work had an overwhelming impact. Where previously nature had been widely regarded as impenetrable, Newton proposed that it was instead subject to laws that could be expressed simply and precisely through mathematical formulas.
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> This "paradigm shift" influenced all realms of inquiry, as 18th-century thinkers sought to match Newton's science of nature with a science of what they termed "human nature," which they regarded as similarly orderly, subject to laws, and open to observation and comprehension. A key tenet of Enlightenment thought was that science consists of analysis: i.e., the reduction of vastly complex phenomena to a small number of constituent parts. In natural science, landmark advances would be achieved by the application of this notion; extraordinarily sophisticated organisms were discovered to be systematically made up of cells, ultimately leading in the 1830s to cell theory, and the atomic structure of the natural elements was laid open, allowing John Dalton to publish the first table of the elements in 1803.

From this revolution, changes in the way scholars thought about the Bible, and the possibilities of criticism, quickly followed:

> It is in this milieu that we encounter the first attempt to delineate the putative sources of the Pentateuch. In 1753, a French scientist and medical doctor by the name of Jean Astruc transferred his vocation's new analytical disciplines to his avocation: biblical study. Like Spinoza and Simon before him, Astruc had only the biblical text from which to work. Unlike them, he lived in the confident age of the Enlightenment: all the text needed was a set of laws to explain its inconsistencies, paramount among them being the Torah's use of diverse and seemingly divergent names for the divinity. Already going back to the 17th century, confidence had become endemic to academic pursuits, as in René Descartes's insistence that we accept only knowledge that can be known and demonstrated with certainty. Scholarship of the Bible could be no exception. From Astruc one can trace a straight line to the assertion of Charles Augustus Briggs that "surely will the old Bible rise in the reconstructions of biblical criticism into a splendor and a glory greater than ever before."

There was one more step to this process:

> A key ancillary step in this process involved the beginnings of "history" itself as an academic discipline—and not only a discipline but, like physics, an exact science: a *Wissenchaft*. (In practice, *Wissenschaft* referred both to science in the strict sense and to scholarship in general or any legitimate field of knowledge.) If, in the 18th century, educated people turned to philosophy to unlock the mysteries of human life, during the 19th century they turned to the putatively "scientific" analysis of the past to provide insight and inspiration in politics, law, economics, morals, and religion.

This style of analysis has led to a field with a diverse set of assumptions and goals, which has complicated the possibility of a shared language or guidelines. Much of Berman's work is a criticism of criticism, so to speak, in that he criticizes the overstepping of Biblical criticism, critiquing the instances in which Biblical criticism oversteps the available evidence.

In light of this, Berman is particularly fond of the humility of Rav Levi Ben Gershon, the medieval commentator Ralbag, who was sensitive to this issue, as he points out in his interview with 18Forty. The Ralbag notes that the laws of the details of the Mishkan, first explicated earlier in the Torah in the portions of *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*, are reiterated later in the Torah in the portions of *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei*. He is bothered by this reformulation, as general literature rarely offers complete reformulations of the same points later in the work. The Ralbag concludes that people must have once written that way, and that Moshe wrote with the literary conventions of the time. Berman explains why he finds this Ralbag particularly poignant:

> I love that Ralbag for two reasons. I wish more of my academic colleagues were like the Ralbag, because what the Ralbag is saying is, to me it seems clear that this doesn't work, but maybe my way of looking at the world and thinking of things is dependent on the time in which I live. And maybe once upon a time things were different. And so I will suspend judgment. Maybe there's something I don't understand, and that's okay. And I don't understand how people wrote in the ancient times. And the second thing I love about what the Ralbag says is that he was totally right. That is, when you look in a bunch of ancient writings, you'll see stories where a king commands his servant, "Do A, B, C, and D, and E, and F." And then it says, "And the servant went off, and he did A, B, C, D, E, and F." This is all over the place, this is the way they wrote. It helped with mnemonic memory things. You can remember the composition better if you have certain things that are repeated over and over. So the Ralbag was right without even knowing any of this stuff.

We end with Berman's final words about this Ralbag, words that could just as easily be about Berman, and speak well to how a religious life can live and love the questions, without fear:

But the main point is what I said before, he had intellectual modesty. He knew you don’t die from a kashya, as they say in yeshiva.