

What Biblical Criticism Means to Me



18Forty started with a question about Biblical criticism. Mitch Eichen, who really got this project off the ground, called me on the phone and wanted me to write a curriculum responding to the questions of Biblical criticism. I said no—for a few reasons, but most importantly, I am far from an expert on the topic. It's actually ridiculous to even make such a disclaimer. It reminds me of people on Twitter with a dozen followers who write "RT's do not equal endorsements" in their bio. Don't worry, no one is really seeing what you tweet and no one wants your endorsement. It's the same for me and Biblical criticism—I don't have any original ideas and no one is asking me for any even if I did. I am woefully in over my head. As it stands, I struggle to finish the weekly parsha and there are full books in Tanach I have never even touched. So this is not a subject I feel qualified on which to weigh in. But, even with that disclaimer, here we are.

Honestly, it's a disclaimer I don't fully believe in. I think non-expert voices—wading through articles, texts, and ideas—have an important place in religious discourse. Experts with well formulated conclusions and opinions are obviously a crucial part of formulating religious ideas, but so is listening in on an individual's search, uncertainty, and discovery. As I told you, I am not an expert on this topic and given the stakes, many would just leave any further discourse to the experts. But, like Mitch and others, it is not only experts who are trying to find their way through this subject and sometimes walking alongside a novice is less daunting and more informative than diving in with the experts.

My first foray into the questions regarding the authorship of the Torah began in high school. A book was published called, *One People, Two Worlds*, a dialogue between Ammiel Hirsch, a Reform rabbi, and Yosef Reinman, an Orthodox rabbi and well-regarded writer in the frum community. After its publication, the book courted a fair deal of controversy, due to its interdenominational dialogue. Their book tour together was abruptly canceled. Some in the Orthodox community still praised the work, but the controversy completely overshadowed its reception. It's also probably why I decided to read it. The controversy itself was just too compelling. I remember my mother was confident that the traditional viewpoint would be so obviously persuasive that she encouraged me to read it as well. For much of the book, that was the case. But I must admit, even close to twenty years later, their discussion about the issues of Biblical criticism still nag at my soul.

I am far more interested in the meta-conversation about how a book thousands of years old can retain its sanctity and relevance even in the face of such scholarship.

The Reform rabbi presents the somewhat famous comment of Ibn Ezra to Genesis 12:6:

For centuries there have been commentators who have raised questions about the perfection of the Torah. No less a commentator than Ibn Ezra, in explaining Genesis 12:6, which suggests that the Torah passage was written many years after the circumstances described, wrote "I have a secret, but let the wise person remain silent."

I remember looking at the issue and feeling a pit in my stomach. Rabbi Reinman's response (for this issue at least) didn't help me. "I personally have no idea of the nature of Ibn Ezra's secret," he responded, "he has successfully concealed it from me." Later in the book, he presents in more detail his views regarding Biblical criticism, but most surround the very true (but personally unhelpful) culture of anti-Semitic origins of the discipline. Maybe it helps some to know that the discipline was started as a deliberate attempt to undermine Jewish claims of authenticity, but a few hundred years later this twelfth grade boy wanted a more substantive response.

It's hard to describe the effect some of these challenges initially had on me. Even some fairly innocuous challenges—like the Masoretic Text and the differences between the Torah text as we have it and that as presented in the Talmud. I remember taking long walks with my friend, Yoni Statman, who would outline some of the history and challenges with which he was presented during his undergraduate course in Bible at Yeshiva University. It felt like realizing for the first time that your parents sometimes got into arguments. When you're little, you don't really appreciate the very serious arguments and fights your parents may have. But all marriages have friction and at some

point, you realize that even your parents had stronger moments and weaker moments in their marriage. That emotional shift, from a childlike reverence for your parent's marriage to something more realistic and complex, for me at least, is what the discipline of Biblical criticism created. When I first looked at these issues it made me uneasy. Admittedly, I think about them less and less nowadays. Not because I found clear definitive answers, though many are out there, but because I fundamentally believe in the religious impulse the Torah articulates. Some will likely be left wanting with anything less than a clear Q&A guide to all of the challenges along with all of the answers. There are books and articles that do just that and we have links to those materials. Others will be happier just skipping the topic altogether, resting assured that others more qualified have properly considered and responded to the most vexing issues. But here we are doing neither. Yes, we'll take a clear-headed look at what some of the most problematic issues are, but I am far more interested in the meta-conversation about how a book thousands of years old can retain its sanctity and relevance even in the face of such scholarship.

In 2012, Rabbi Nati Helfgot, published a book entitled *Mikra & Meaning: Studies in Bible and Its Interpretation*. I must admit: I have not read it. But I did read the fascinating foreword by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. He was sensitive to many of my concerns broaching this subject and, as always, masterfully articulates the risk. He describes the book as "admittedly, not every ben Torah's cup of tea," a fairly drastic understatement given the rather negligible role the study of Tanach plays in most yeshivot. But, he does not mince words when describing what is at stake:

First and foremost, of course, is the concern with *emunot vede'ot*, with the prospect of the possible deleterious impact of questionable material upon the integrity of faith. That impact may itself be dual, manifesting itself through the corrosion of personal fidelity, on the one hand, and corruption of the sacral text proper, on the other. Even a routine bibliographic reference to an innocent article may introduce a tyro to adjacent heresy; and recourse to an insight, wholly acceptable per se, may invest its proponent with a mantle of expertise and acuity, hence habituating looking to him or her for the explication, possibly revisionist, of difficult cruces. And, of course, direct exposure to *apikorsus*, in significant measure, may contaminate the wellspring of *Torat emet*, by the admixture of chaff not always distinguishable from the wheat.

I am acutely sensitive to this concern because much of my faith was shaken in this very way. I now stand on sturdier ground, but the question is far easier to articulate than the time and expertise needed to construct answers. Still, some have these questions and they cut to the very heart of belief. 18Forty was founded on the conviction that we need not shy away from larger issues, no matter the doubt and chaos they may create. There may not be neat and simple answers, but will we try to create a space where we can better understand the underlying issues, the risks, and their implications. So, my dear friends, once more unto the breach. With healthy curiosity and humility, I hope we emerge more enlightened.

"One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask."

Jews have a complex relationship with Biblical criticism in general. There's the obvious reason—Biblical criticism analyzes the Torah through the lens of a man-made document rather than originating from God. But there's another reason: Biblical criticism was founded in a culturally antagonist climate to Judaism. As Yaacov Shavit described in his fascinating (and far too costly) book on the history of the modern day polemics surrounding the Bible's authorship:

Added to all this was the fact that the new criticism was perceived as one more manifestation of anti-Semitism in the guise of science. In the context of the political and cultural reality in Germany, in the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Wellhausen and Delitzsch's statements were perceived as another wave in the flood of anti-Semitic literature. The Jews who reacted to them saw them as a disparagement of the Bible, with the aim of divesting the Jews of their honor and their historical rights. They felt they were confronted by an army of enemies of the Bible, who were representing it as a book full of distortions, and adding their depiction of it as a "Semitic creation," contrary to the "Germanic spirit"; as a book, which on one hand was described by its new enemies as an immoral book, and on the other as a book that expresses the contemptible ethics of the weak.

Shavit's book, *The Hebrew Bible Reborn: From Holy Scripture to the Book of Books: A History of Biblical Culture and the Battles over the Bible in Modern Judaism*, which was translated into English by Chaya Naor, is an incredible presentation of the polemics, issues, and responses between the Jewish world and the world of Biblical criticism. He covers in painstaking detail the controversy surrounding Friedrich Delitzsch's contentious 1902 lecture series, *Babel and Bible*, that posited that much of the Torah's stories were borrowed from Babylonian myths. Shavit begins with a charming story about a play the Frankfurt Jewish community put on to respond to Delitzsch's accusations in 1903:

In the play, a splendid royal figure, conjured up from the dead, comes on to the stage. He is Hammurabi, King of ancient Babylon. The character who is the host in the play, Professor Babylonowitsch, welcomes the king and asks him to present to the audience the tidings of the one and only God. Hammurabi begins by babbling (Gebabbel), then quotes some of the cruelest of his laws, and declares his faith in a multiplicity of gods. "This fellow," pointing angrily to his host, "wants to Judaize my pure faith in idols!" (*"Er will mir mein reines Götzentum verjuden!"*) Professor Babylonowitsch is taken aback, since in his lectures he has described the ancient king as a just monarch who believes in one God - in Jehovah, who later became the God of Israel. He turns to the audience, apologizes, and says that the King must be somewhat demented, probably because of his exorbitant age. Hammurabi, however, jeers at the professor. He accuses him of trying to thrust the alien spirit of the Bible on him, and adds that if he had a sword in his hand, or at least a whip, the distinguished professor would not get away without receiving his just punishment. Only after the Babylonian king leaves the stage does the professor regain his composure and tells the audience that the figure they had seen on stage was only pretending to be Hammurabi. At the end of the play, the Eternal Jew comes on stage to speak the last words. He is the son of an ancient but living people that faithfully brings the message of the one and only God to humankind:

God will guide me and humankind to the goal,
He Himself will bring redemption to us all,

Every cloud of error will disappear
And the promised future will come to us here.

Professor Babylonowitsch was a clever imitation of Delitzsch. This incident characterizes much of the continued response to Biblical criticism within the Jewish community—derision or distraction. And in many ways, for most, that makes sense. Many of the more complex areas of theology and philosophy are ignored for a host of reasons—they're too complex, we're too lazy, they're too boring. But it's unfair to dismiss such an important area of Jewish thought, given that so many are bothered by these issues. **It's equally unfair to exhaustively pretend to cover the landscape of so complicated a conceptual region in so short a time, and this conversation should be thought of as an introduction, an opening. I hope that this introduction provides insight and perspective into this topic, which we will talk about without derision or distraction.**

So where do I stand? Personally, these questions don't bother me like they once did—but I am extremely hesitant to dismiss any and am certainly sympathetic to those who are bothered by them. Rav Tzadok HaKohen, the great Hasidic thinker who has influenced my thoughts more than anyone else, addresses why the Torah uses temporal language like “until this very day” (עד היום הזה). The question Rav Tzadok was addressing—and one I always noticed—is why does the Torah use temporal language, “until *this* very day,” if it was meant to be relevant eternally? (This question is not limited to Biblical scholars. In fact, as Joshua Berman recounts, a group of Satmar Hasidim recently met with him because they were troubled as well.) I struggle with the notion that the Torah was written in the language and style of its day, an approach many find satisfying that was articulated by the Rambam—but it still grates on my sensibilities. Shouldn't a document from God have a timeless quality?

I connect with more post-modern and perhaps somewhat mystical approaches that allow one to grasp the atemporal nature of Torah, while still confronting the questions this discipline raises. Committing to the continued relevance and interpretive significance of the Torah is in itself an exercise in faith. My teacher, Dr. Yaakov Elman, recounts how a group of 19th and 20th century thinkers—each independent of the other—embarked on such a program. Were they entirely successful? Perhaps not. But the never-ending negotiation between interpretation and text is one I find deeply moving and satisfying. And we may not have any other choice. As Dr. Shnayer Laiman concludes his discussion on Breuer's approach to Biblical criticism:

While we reject Rabbi Breuer's central thesis, we applaud his readiness to confront modernity, including the modern study of the Bible. There are undeniable risks in any such confrontation. Not to confront modernity, however, is more than risky for Orthodoxy, it is suicidal.

Thomas Merton, the great contemplative writer, once wrote that “one of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.” My hope is that we enter this conversation with a readiness to ask challenging questions, and to grow together in the process.

Tune in to this introductory episode to Biblical Criticism.