תורה

THE TORAH

A Modern Commentary

Edited

by

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Union of American Hebrew Congregations

NEW YORK

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

PLAUT, W. GUNTHER, 1912–

[Torah] = The Torah.

Includes original Hebrew text and the Jewish Publication Society's English translation of the Pentateuch and of the traditional Haftarot.

Bibliography: p.

CONTENTS: Plaut, W. G. Commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.—Bamberger, B. J. Leviticus.—Hallo, W. W. Essays on ancient Near Eastern literature.

I. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch—Commentaries.
I. Bamberger, Bernard Jacob, 1904–1980. II. Hallo, William W. Essays on ancient Near Eastern literature. 1981. III. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. Hebrew. 1981. IV. Bible. O.T. Pentateuch. English. Jewish Publication Society. 1981. V. Jewish Publication Society of America. VI. Jews. Liturgy and ritual. Haftarot (Reform, Plaut). English & Hebrew. 1981. VII. Jews. Liturgy and ritual. Reform rite, Plaut. VIII. Title.

BS1225.3.P55 1981 222'.1077 80–26967

ISBN 0–8074–0055–6 AACR1

ISBN 0–8074–0165–X Hebrew open

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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General Introduction to the Torah

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The Book

Torah is the Hebrew term used for the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch. Genesis is the first of these five books, and the Torah is the first part of the Bible. The term "Old Testament" is not used by Jews, since it implies a "new" testament. "Bible" as used in this book refers, therefore, to the Hebrew Bible and does not include the Christian Scriptures.

This commentary proceeds from the assumption that the Torah is a book which had its origin in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people.

Many people deny this basic assumption. They believe that the Torah is "the word of God," given (by direct inspiration or in some other way) by God to Moses. Some agree that the text in being transmitted from generation to generation may have been marred by certain scribal errors. But the book as a whole, they insist, is the word of God and not of man. This orthodox or fundamentalist viewpoint maintains, therefore, that if the text says that "God created" then this is a fact, for the word of God is by definition truth itself. It maintains further that the Torah, being given by God, must carry meaning in every word and that not even one letter can be superfluous. One may not understand everything, but that is a human shortcoming. If modern scientific knowledge appears to contradict the biblical word, then either our present-day science will prove to be in error or we do not understand the Bible properly. This was and is the position of Orthodox Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity, and of most commentaries of the past.

The commentator who differs with this approach and proceeds on the premise of human rather than divine authorship faces two initial questions: (1) Does God have anything to do with the Torah? (2) How is the book different from any other significant literature of the past?

1] DOES GOD HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE TORAH? While God is not the author of the Torah in the fundamentalist sense, the Torah is a book about humanity's understanding of and experience with God. This understanding has varied over the centuries as have human experiences. Since the Torah tradition was at first repeated by word of mouth, and only after many generations set down in writing, the final text testifies to divergent ideas about God and the people. These stand side by side in the book and tell us of our ancestors' changing and developing beliefs. In this sense, then, the book is not by God but by a people. While individual authors had a hand in its composition, the people of the Book made the Torah their own and impressed their character upon it.

Some would leave it at that and go no further; they would approach the Torah primarily as an antique document and say:

This is how the authors and their listeners saw the world. It is instructive to study their viewpoint and their faith.

This commentary goes further. We believe that it is possible to say: The Torah is ancient Israel's distinctive record of its search for God. It attempts to record the meeting of the human and the Divine, the great moments of encounter. Therefore, the text is often touched by the ineffable Presence. The Torah tradition testifies to a people of extraordinary spiritual sensitivity. God is not the author of the text, the people are; but God's voice may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.

Is this true for every verse and story? Not in our view. But it is often hard to know whether the voice that speaks has the ring of permanence or resounds to the apprehensions and misapprehensions of a particular age. Our own insights are not so secure that we can judge past ages with any easy sense of superiority. In the face of the unique tradition before us, modesty and caution are a necessary rule.

This does not mean, however, that we abdicate all judgment, treat legend as fact, or gloss over those texts which represent God in anthropomorphic terms. This commentary is neither an apology for, nor an endorsement of, every passage. It will present the modern readers with tools for understanding and leave the option to them. It is also well to know in advance that despite the enormous and imaginative scholarship—archeological, linguistic, anthropological, and other—which has been lavished on the Torah we still must often conclude that we do not know how to interpret a word, or passage, or do not understand the original context.

2] HOW IS THE TORAH DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER SIGNIFICANT LITERATURE OF THE PAST? For those of us who see in the Torah a people's search for and meeting with God the answer is self-evident. The search and the meeting provide a record which by its very nature has something to say about the essentials of human existence.

But even for those who see in the book only the human quest, with all its strengths and weaknesses, there ought to be something special about it. For over two and one-half millennia the Torah has been the keystone of Jewish life, the starting point of Christendom, and the background of Islam. As such it has played and continues to play a significant role in the world. Western people especially are what they are in part because of this book—because of what the Torah actually said or meant to say and because of what it was believed to have said and to have meant.

This distinction is important, for in reading the Torah one should keep in mind that what the authors said in their own time to their own contemporaries within their own intellectual framework is one thing and what later generations did with this text, what they contributed to it by commentary and homily is another. This long tradition of holding up the book like a prism, discovering through it and in it a vast spectrum of insights, makes the Torah unlike any other work. This is particularly true for the Jews. They cannot know their past or themselves without this book, for in it they will discover the framework of their own existence.

The Torah is important for yet another reason. This commentary proceeds from the assumption that in addition to the original meaning and the interpretations offered over the centuries the Torah has relevance for our time. Of course, not everything that was relevant yesterday speaks to us today, and passages which held little or minor meaning in the past now speak to us suddenly with an urgent voice. For instance, the story of Babel was for many years seen as a tale of human arrogance; today it speaks to us as a warning

about the dehumanizing effects of urban life.

The relevance of this story, as well as many other portions of the Torah, may be found in questions rather than answers; in fact, one of the contemporary "attractions" of the Torah is its open-endedness, which is to say, it raises issues without providing single answers that close the door to further inquiry. There is no doubt that tomorrow's generation will hear the words differently again and that the search for new answers will always continue. Our commentary attempts to reflect this open-ended quality of the Torah. It will often provide options, and it is our hope that many additional questions will be asked by the readers who will be motivated to search for their own answers.

But there are also a number of problems. Some of these arise needlessly, out of failure to read the text properly; others are due to the contrast between certain ancient and contemporary assumptions about our world and must be freely faced. The modern reader should clearly understand that biblical man thought and wrote in terms of his own time and not ours. For us, reading the Bible should be an attempt to understand it and not a cut-and-dried exercise in our own contemporary dogmatics. We must not come to the text with preconceptions but should try to let it speak to us in its own way. Only then will the door be open to meaningful reading.

Literalism

Contemporary readers are often put off because they have been exposed to a method of biblical interpretation which understands the text in a literal way. Thus, if Genesis says that God created woman out of the rib of man, or tells of a serpent speaking, or of ancient man living several hundred years, the literalist interprets the story to mean precisely what the words convey. This literal application reaches down to individual words and phrases.

Quite aside from the indisputable fact that the Torah text we use today is merely one available version (although the accepted one) and aside from the fact that most literalists not knowing the Hebrew original base their opinions on one particular translation (which is in itself a type of interpretation and therefore a secondary source),[1] the contemporary reader familiar with the history and nature of the text will have to remember that a literal understanding of the Torah may lead to grave misconceptions.

Even the ancient Jewish Sages, who believed that the Torah was a divinely authored book, did not take the text literally. They took it seriously, but they always looked behind the flat literal meaning. They realized that the Bible—in addition to everything else it was to them—abounded in subtle metaphors and allusions, that it used word plays and other literary devices, that it sometimes spoke satirically, and that its poetry could not be subjected to a simple approach. They agreed without embarrassment that one could disagree on what the Torah meant, and on this sound principle we ourselves should base our approach to the text.

Myth and Legend

The reader must further understand that the Torah contains a great variety of material: laws, narratives, history, folk tales, songs, proverbial sayings, poetry, and, especially in the early parts of Genesis, myths and legends. By myth we understand a tale involving human beings and divine powers, a tale which was meant and understood as having happened and which by its existence expressed, explained, or validated important aspects of existence. Thus the Eden myth

[1] See below, "Text and Translation."

explained the origin of death and validated, for Christian tradition, the concept of humanity's inherent sinfulness and need of salvation. Legends are sagas of the past amplified by folk memory, but they usually neither validate nor explain. Jacob's prowess at the well (Gen. 29:10) is of this category. As the Torah moves from the creation of the world toward the creation of the people of Israel, the mythic elements increasingly give way to legend and these in turn to history in the modern sense.[2]

In observing these distinctions the reader of the Bible should not, however, be misled into dismissing either myth or legend as "irrelevant" and accepting only history as "relevant." What usually passes for history is not an accurate scientific recording of events but an interpretation of such events—assuming even that one knows what the event "really" was. The best of modern historians is an interpreter, selective summarizer, commentator, and often philosopher who brings a point of view to the material. This is precisely what the Book of Genesis does. While its material included myths and legends, these in time became incorporated into the consciousness of the people. For what people believe their past to mean assumes a dynamism of its own; the experience itself becomes creative. Thus, while Abraham's vision of a God who promised him the land of Canaan will not pass as historic "fact," its reality was accepted by generations of Abraham's descendants and, for them, validated their possession of the land.

One must not think that this kind of "mythicizing history" (as Buber called it[3]) is found only in ancient texts. Take for instance the selective way in which American tradition treats the lives of the old frontiersmen. They are presented primarily as enterprising pioneers, courageous people whose love of independence was indelibly stamped on the nation they helped to build. Such a picture is, of course, highly selective and slanted. It says little about the desire of the pioneers to get rich quickly or their need to move west after repeated failures in the east, and so on. But Americans have preferred to see their past in an idealized light, and their admiration of the value of personal independence and frontier virtues has itself shaped the psychology of the nation.

So it is with the Torah. It may be said to mirror the collective memory of our ancestors, and in the course of centuries this record became a source of truth for the Children of Israel. The reader will therefore do well to keep in mind that the Torah not only speaks of history but has made history by helping to shape human thought.

The origins of the Torah are one thing, its life through the centuries another, and its ability to speak to us today yet a third. This commentary is concerned with all three aspects separately and jointly.

How the Torah Came to Be Written

Doubts that the Torah was a book set down by one author, Moses, developed some centuries ago, but it was not until the nineteenth century that extensive investigations made the critical study of the biblical text a highly specialized discipline. The early critics

[2] One should also note that while there are myths in Genesis there is no mythology, i.e., there are no tales of the adventures of the gods (or God). The fragment in Gen. 6:1–4 is the only exception. Genesis is not concerned with the story of the divine realm but with the emergence of humanity; the drama is played out not on a supernatural stage but on earth and has a theme of rebellion, sin, and potential redemption.

[3] Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 17. Buber considers the emotion with which an event was experienced an important aspect of history, one which is often played down in the usual annalistic or "factual" treatment. See also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 3 ff.

noted the differential use of the names of God in various parts of the Torah, the discrepancies of certain accounts and figures, and different literary styles. Later scholars further analyzed the text so that they could discern many authors and several editors, and they theorized about times and events when these sources and documents were created and finally combined into the Torah as we have it now.

The theory which continues to command general scholarly adherence is called the Documentary Hypothesis and is often referred to by two of its most prominent expositors, Karl Graf and Julius Wellhausen.[4] In substance it says that there are four major sources or documents (called J, E, P, and D), the combination of which during the fifth century B.C.E. resulted in the creation of a single book, the Torah, which was declared a sacred text by official canonization about the year 400.

J is the name given by biblical critics to the author who used the divine name יְהוָה (YHVH or YHWH) and probably lived in the Southern Kingdom some time after the death of Solomon; he was responsible for most of Genesis. E uses אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) and authored the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) and other passages of Genesis, as well as much in Exodus and Numbers; he was most likely a northern contemporary of J.

D is the author of Deuteronomy, which is said to be the book found by King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. (II Kings 22; some also assign Gen. 14 to D).[5]

P is the author of the first chapter of Genesis, the Book of Leviticus, and other sections characterized by interest in genealogies and priesthood. When did the main body of the priestly writing originate? According to Dr. Bamberger:

"The nineteenth-century Bible critics considered P the latest part of the Torah, composed during or after the Babylonian exile (approximately 597 to 516 B.C.E.). It was intended as a sort of constitution for the Second Commonwealth when the Jews had no king and the High Priest was leader and spokesman of the nation. According to this theory, P was the framework into which J/E and D were fitted, in the fifth century B.C.E.

"This once widely accepted view has been challenged in various ways by many twentieth-century Bible scholars, amongst whom Yehezkel Kaufmann has been one of the boldest and most original.[6] He held that P is not the latest, but the earliest, of the sources incorporated in the Torah. It contains primitive elements, such as the rite of the scapegoat (Lev. 16:8–10, 20–22), which could not have originated after the period of the great prophets. Moreover, P often reflects conditions very different from those of the exile and its aftermath.

"The newer critics are in many ways persuasive but it is always easier to demolish old views than to construct viable new ones. The earlier critics proved conclusively that the Torah is not a unit and that it does not date as a whole from the time of Moses; but their reconstruction of early Israelite history was far from definitive. A host of difficulties has been marshalled against it in recent decades; but the newer attempts at synthesis, such as Kaufmann's, are also open to question."

It is the position of this commentary that P contains many old strands and traditions

[4] Since, even today, the Graf-Wellhausen school commands wide support, our commentary indicates from time to time the differentiation of sources suggested by the school. Some examples are provided in the analysis of the Flood story, Gen. 8, and the tale of Korah, Num. 16.

[5] A detailed analysis of how Deuteronomy came to be written will be found in the introduction to that book.

[6] *The Religion of Israel.* Abridged English translation by M. Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

(probably predating J and E) but also later additions when the document was put into final written form after the return from exile (see "Introducing Leviticus"). Altogether we would give 950 through 450 as the years during which the literary process and its redaction took place, that is, from the days of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah to their destruction and the time of exile and return.

Since Moses lived in the thirteenth century B.C.E. he had, in that view, nothing to do with the writing of the complete Torah. His name was attached to it as author at the time of the book's canonization. This whole analysis is vigorously disputed by those who attempt to show that Moses was indeed the author. They consider much or all higher literary criticism as erroneous and some of its foundations as infected by Christian bias.[7]

It has been suggested that the first four books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers) originally formed a four-part unit called Tetrateuch by modern scholars, while Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings constituted another separate complex. Our commentary accepts this basic approach but with the understanding that, while Deuteronomy was put into its final (or nearly final) form, at some time before the Tetrateuch assumed its *written* shape, the underlying traditions followed a different time sequence. We believe that the major sources from which the Tetrateuch was formed (J, E, P) were older than the Deuteronomist (D) tradition. That is to say: Deuteronomy as a *written* document preceded Genesis to Numbers; but the latter's narratives and laws are generally of earlier origin.

There are still other scholars who, while they accept the existence of different sources, would see the contribution of these sources to the final text in a different light. In this view the various strands of tradition were very old—some of them older than Moses while others are assignable to him—and were transmitted for many centuries by word of mouth. As the centuries wore on, all of these strands coalesced in popular telling, and in time, probably through the efforts of a literary genius of unknown name, they became a single story with many facets. Variants of the same story and even contradictions were left untouched because one did not tamper with sacred memories and also because the ancient era did not demand an either/or but could say that together both sides of the account represented the truth. If in one place it says that Israel spent 400 years in Egypt and in another that it was 430, the modern reader is tempted to ask: How many years was it really? The ancient reader was satisfied that both 400 and 430 meant a long, long time.

In general, our commentary favors the position just outlined, namely, that the Torah as we now know it is essentially the repository of centuries of traditions which became One Tradition and One Book. At what time it was set down as we have it now will likely remain a matter of conjecture; what is important is to both understand its background and at the same time treat the book as an integral unit. With Franz Rosenzweig we

[7] There are also those who, on the basis of critical studies, conclude that Moses' part in the creation of the Torah is commanding. For an advocacy of this view, see M. H. Segal, *The Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967); for a general critique, see Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961); for a specific critique, see Benno Jacob's massive commentaries on Genesis and Exodus.

"In general, it is probably true that much Jewish scholarship, even that which was not totally traditionalistic, was initially, and to a degree still remains, rather cool toward the standard results of German biblical scholarship, well aware of the subtle anti-Judaism, if not anti-Semitism, which by no means necessarily, but very often *de facto*, accompanies any depreciation of the Old Testament—and it is undeniable that such implications were often present in much of the classical 'critical' literature." (H. D. Hummel, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 4, col. 907.)

might call the final editor R, not because the initial reminds us of redactor, but of *Rabbenu*, our teacher. The finished book represents the teaching tradition of Israel, and as such it has had a dynamic life all of its own.

We therefore ask three questions: "What did the text mean originally?" "What has it come to mean?" and "What can it mean to us today?" Our commentary disagrees with traditional interpreters over divine origin and Mosaic authorship (that is to say, it finds higher criticism admissible), but it does agree with them on treating the text as it is, a unified whole, for it was approached this way by many generations and in this way it has made its impact on history. An antiquarian assessment will always be of historical interest and is reflected in this commentary, but to us the Bible is primarily the living textbook of the Jew and, with different emphasis, of the Christian.[8]

Text and Translation

Readers of the Bible are usually unaware that what they are reading is not "the" original version of the manuscript and that the translation they use is actually a kind of commentary on the Hebrew text which it means to render.

There is no original manuscript available which was written by any of the authors of the Bible. The oldest extant parchment scroll of the Torah dates from about 900 C.E., which is probably more than 1,300 years later than the likely time of its composition. Quite naturally, much happens to a text in the course of oral transmission and copying by hand, and one must not be astonished that a number of variants and versions arose. It is a great tribute to the care and devotion which were lavished on the text that the variants are relatively minor and the scribal corruptions rather few. Our commentary uses the Masoretic version. The Masoretes, so called because they transmitted the *Masorah* (מָסוֹרָה) or textual traditions, were scholars who over the centuries attempted to ascertain and preserve the best text. One of these versions, produced in Tiberias in the tenth century C.E., found general acceptance and is the standard Hebrew text in synagogue use today.

Because the knowledge of classical Hebrew diminished or disappeared among many Jews after they returned from the Babylonian exile, the need for translations arose. In the course of centuries there appeared translations in Aramaic (Targum) which was the popular language of postexilic Jews, Greek (Septuagint), Latin (Vulgate), Syriac (Peshitta), Arabic, and in modern times in every written language of man. The important ancient translations often give us significant clues about the original from which they were translated, for there are differences between them. What is even more important is to recognize that every translator interprets the original text, for he renders it as he understands (or misunderstands) it.

This becomes particularly apparent when one follows modern translations. For instance, there are great differences between the famous and beloved English King James Version (published in 1611, and often called "Authorized," i.e., for the Church of England) and later renditions such as the American version, or the German Luther Bible and the translation by Rosenzweig and Buber. Many of these differences are stylistic since the language of translation has itself undergone vast changes; others are due to new insights into the philology of ancient days and the

[8] This holistic approach has lately received support from Christian scholars. Thus J. P. Fokkelman writes: "The birth of a text resembles that of a man: the umbilical cord, which connected the text with its time and the man or men who produced it, is severed once its existence has become a fact; the text is going to lead a life of its own. . . ." (*Narrative Art in Genesis*, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975, pp. 3 f.) See the survey by B. W. Anderson, *JBL*, 97, 1 (1978), 23ff.

political, social, and economic circumstances to which the text refers.

The translation of the Torah used is the New Jewish Version, published by the Jewish Publication Society (revised printing, 1967), with the kind permission of the publishers. This translation, in addition to its scholarly and linguistic merits,[9] has been made particularly valuable by the publication of the translators' *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (1969, referred to as JPS *Notes*) which explain in detail why certain translations were chosen and others rejected.

[9] The late Dr. B. J. Bamberger (who authored the Commentary on Leviticus in this volume) was a distinguished member of the Committee of Translators.