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Review Essay:

SEEKING THE KEYS TO THE PALACE GATES:

RABBI MOSHE SHAMAH'S COMMENTARY ON THE TORAH

A Review of Rabbi Moshe Shamah's

Recalling the Covenant:

A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah
(Ktav, 2011, 1165 pages).

INTRODUCTION

R Moshe Shamah has published a new commentary on the Torah. It is comprised of edited essays that initially appeared online in his Judaic Seminars.¹ In the first sentence of his introduction, he professes his belief that Tanakh emanates from divinely inspired prophets (xix). This statement sets the religious tone for his commentary, which sets out to uncover the primary meaning of God's revealed word.

Many works of *derush* are published on the Torah. In such works, authors tend to use the biblical text as a springboard to present their own ideas and values. In contrast, the serious pursuit of *peshat* is an effort to determine the primary sense of God's values as conveyed through the Torah. Done properly, this is much harder work, as one ideally must have command of all relevant biblical texts, rabbinic tradition, later commentary and scholarship, language, grammar, syntax, poetics, literary techniques, the ancient Near Eastern context, and more.

R. Shamah justifies the need for his commentary by noting the lack of adequate material written on the Torah focusing on *peshat* that accepts the basics of tradition along with the compelling features of modern scholarship (xx). He addresses a wide range of issues, including linguistic

¹ The essays are archived at http://judaicseminar.org/addtl_files/bible.html.

elucidations of individual words; literary structures of passages; parallels between sections of the Torah; religious-philosophical issues; the relationship between *Torah she-biKetav* and *Torah she-beAl peh*; surveys of *parshanut*; symbolic meanings of laws, narratives, and midrashim; a consideration of the Torah in light of its ancient Near Eastern setting; and poetic techniques. It is particularly valuable to have a commentary of this high caliber that can be read by scholars and laypeople alike.

Ibn Ezra set out his commitment to *peshat* in his introduction to the Torah: "The Lord alone I fear, and I shall favor no one in interpreting the Torah." The pursuit of *peshat* means ultimate allegiance to the text rather than to the teachings of any particular interpreter, even one's own teacher.² While R. Shamah expresses love and gratitude to his mentor R. Solomon Sassoon (xxii) and quotes him frequently, he lives up to Ibn Ezra's standard and submits each opinion to critical evaluation. R. Shamah models our early morning prayer by taking seriously the pursuit of *yirat Shamayim* (the fear of Heaven) and the commitment to be *modeh al ha-emet* (admit the truth).³

The commentary is written with patient wisdom. R. Shamah has read a considerable amount, and he sifts through arguments carefully, always staying focused on the text of the Torah. His essays are not encumbered with footnotes or irrelevant tangents. One who reads this commentary will gain an excellent sense of the major themes of the Torah in a clear, methodical, accessible manner.

Two regular features of this commentary both enhance and detract. The list of references comprises a mere four pages (1089-1092), but there

² Cf. R. Hayyim of Volozhin's comments to Mishna *Avot* 1:4 (in his *Ruah Hayyim*): "A disciple is forbidden to accept his rabbi's teachings if he has any questions about them...We have been allowed to wrestle and struggle with their words, explain our objections, and [have been] taught not to respect any person but love only the truth." Simultaneously, R. Hayyim stresses that the disciple must at all times have proper reverence for his teacher: "He should beware of speaking arrogantly and haughtily if he wishes to object, and of viewing himself as an equal to his teacher or to the author of the book he is contesting. He should know that he may have misunderstood, and will therefore be extremely humble." Translation in Avi Sagi, *The Open Canon: On the Meaning of Halakhic Discourse*, trans. Batya Stein (New York: Continuum, 2007), 139-140.

³ See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation" [in Hebrew], in *ha-Mikra va-Anahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in Our Time, 1979), 13-27; Uriel Simon, "The Pursuit of Truth that Is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah" [in Hebrew], *ibid.*, 28-41; Marvin Fox, "Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation," in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 3-26.

is no question that R. Shamah has read considerably more than what is listed. Similarly, he regularly quotes classical and contemporary scholars, but there are many times that he does not inform the reader whether his presentation is original or if it is drawn from others. On the positive side, the decision to reduce citations enables readers to stay focused on the text analysis and to be convinced by R. Shamah's arguments. Hizkuni introduces his commentary on the Torah by noting that he will employ a similar approach.⁴

Simultaneously, however, there are times when it would be beneficial to see R. Shamah's steps, to learn how he processed opinions to arrive at his conclusions.

There also are occasions where R. Shamah cites excerpts from the discussion forum of his online Judaic Seminar. On the positive side, R. Shamah quotes his colleagues and students alongside classical *mefarshim* and contemporary scholars, giving the sense of a living bet midrash. However, some of the exchanges do not appear to further the discussion and therefore can be distracting.

On the whole, R. Shamah's justification of his commentary is absolutely warranted. This commentary of a master scholar will enable readers to gain greater access to the Torah, to derive religious and moral insight directly from the Torah, to understand the profound relationship between the written Torah and Jewish tradition, and to gain a sense of the best classical and contemporary scholarship has to offer in enhancing our understanding of the Torah's eternal messages.

HALLMARK THEMES

R. Shamah covers a wide range of topics in his methodical manner. A few themes stand out as central to his approach.

A. MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE TORAH IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

In his introduction, R. Shamah laments that the diminished role Tanakh plays in many religious circles today negatively impacts the worldview of

⁴ For analysis of Hizkuni's introduction and its position in the history of *parshanut*, see Sara Japhet, "Hizkuni's Commentary on the Torah: A Portrait of the Composition and Its Purpose" [in Hebrew], in *Sefer ha-Yovel la-Rav Mordechai Breuer*, vol. 1, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2002), 91-111.

such Jews.⁵ In addition to the failure to appreciate the biblical roots of later Jewish tradition, the overemphasis on internal religious life and ritual often comes with the cost of under-emphasis on our responsibilities to humanity and the universal values that Tanakh teaches (xxi). R. Shamah showcases the ethical teachings of the Torah, and also illustrates what a moral revolution it was in its historical setting.

R. Shamah calls attention to the parallels and contrasts between the Torah's laws and the legal codes of the ancient Near East.⁶ In Yitro (356-363) and Mishpatim (385-398), he helps readers appreciate the moral advances of the Torah in its setting. The best overview appears in Ki Tetsei (953-962), where he summarizes the Torah's revolutionary laws regarding women, slaves, the poor, judicial procedures, and concern for animals.⁷

B. PESHAT AND DERASH

R. Shamah belongs to Rambam's rare category of people who do not take every *midrash aggada* literally, but who appreciate the wisdom of Hazal (see Rambam, *Introduction to Perek Helek*). In be-Shallah, he presents a two-part essay "On Interpreting Midrash" (336-348). He first surveys the opinions of Geonim and Rishonim regarding the authority of *midrash aggada* and why we are not generally bound by their literal readings.⁸

⁵ For analysis of why this has been so, see Mordechai Breuer, "Bible in the Curriculum of the Yeshiva" [in Hebrew], in *Mehkarim ba-Mikra u-ba-Hinukh: Presented to Prof. Moshe Ahrend*, ed. Dov Rappel (Jerusalem: Touro College, 1996), 223-235; Frederick E. Greenspahn, "Jewish Ambivalence towards the Bible," *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007), 7-21.

⁶ For a general overview of the value of learning the Torah in its ancient Near Eastern context, see Barry Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 81-100.

⁷ For related studies, see, for example, Moshe Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," and "The Biblical Concept of Asylum," in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 25-50; R. Chaim Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, trans. David Strauss (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), 59-77; Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986-1996), 158-189.

⁸ For surveys of traditional approaches, see, for example, R. Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition* 25:2 (Winter 1990), 18-27; R. Hayyim David Halevi, *Asch Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. #49 (304-307); R. Michael Rosensweig, "Elu va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26:3 (Spring 1992), 4-23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1-20.

His greater contribution follows as he explores specific midrashim, how they relate to the text, and what lessons he believes they teach. For example, the Israelites left Egypt *hamushim* (Exod. 13:18). The *Mekhilta* first offers *peshat* explanations of “armed” or “provisioned” based on biblical parallels. It then applies a word-play, homiletically deriving *hamushim* from the word *hamesh*, that only one out of five (or fifty, or five hundred) Israelites left Egypt, while the rest died during the plague of darkness. These Israelites were assimilationists who died then so the Egyptians would not observe their deaths. This explanation is not intended as literal, argues R. Shamah, but rather teaches that there are times that only a small percentage of people cling to their faith while many assimilate. Those who do not remain faithful do not share in God’s good to the nation and ultimate redemption. Similarly, the midrash stresses the value of keeping national shame private. Here and elsewhere, R. Shamah’s exploration of the meaning and lessons of midrash enriches his commentary.

Elsewhere, R. Shamah stresses the moral imperative of preserving the distinct realms of *peshat* and *derash* lest one conclude that the Torah itself teaches certain values. For example, he discusses Esau’s character portrait in *peshat* and frames it in terms of rabbinic conceptions of Esau rooted in their linkage of Edom to Rome and later to Christianity (128-133).⁹

All who approach Bible study through traditional Jewish sources other than the Bible itself, including many of the popular commentaries composed through the centuries, must be careful to recognize that the Esau of the Bible was nothing like he is portrayed in these sources. There is no indication in the biblical text that he possessed an irreversible hatred for Jacob and surely none that can be relevant to present-day “cultural descendants” of Esau (128).

This analysis is important not only for delimiting the general concerns of *peshat* and *derash*, but for relating midrash to contemporary life. We

⁹ For discussions of the origins of the Edom-Rome-Christianity link in Jewish literature, see Gerson Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19-48; Yair Hoffmann, “Edom as a Symbol of Wickedness in Prophetic Literature,” [in Hebrew] in *Ha-Mikra ve-Toledot Yisrael*, ed. Binyamin Uffenheimer (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 1972), 76-89; R. Moshe Sokolow, “Esav: From Edom to Rome,” in *Mitokh Ha-Ohel: From within the Tent: The Haft-tarot*, Daniel Z. Feldman & Stuart W. Halpern (eds.) (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2011), 65-77; Solomon Zeitlin, “The Origin of the Term Edom for Rome and the Roman Church,” *JQR* 60 (1970), 262-263.

should teach the story of Jacob and Esau in a way that students do not grow up assuming an almost fated animosity by all Christians toward Jews.

Another reason to distinguish between the realms of *peshat* and *derash* is to demonstrate that the Torah does not teach that God punishes without just cause. In his analysis of the command to assess everyone a half-shekel for the national census (445-452), R. Shamah cites the biblical verse: "When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled." (Exod. 30:12) Why would God plague the people? Rashi suggests that a census has the power to arouse the "evil eye" which could lead God to plague the nation. Therefore, God commanded the nation to count half-shekels instead of people to avert divine wrath.

R. Shamah flatly rejects Rashi's explanation: "This interpretation, suffused with what many deem folkloristic ideas popular in past centuries, is not *peshat*... God does not mete out punishment without a cause!" (446). While R. Shamah grants that strands of Rashi's interpretation about an "evil eye" have roots in Hazal, the Torah itself can be understood in other ways more consistent with its other teachings that God never would send a plague simply for numbering individuals. He proceeds to explore the opinions of other commentators to explain the reason for a plague in this verse.

C. WEAVING TOGETHER HALAKHA-PARSHANUT- ANCIENT CONTEXT INTO THE DISCUSSION OF *PESHAT*

R. Shamah's essay on "an eye for an eye" (399-406) brings together many of his strengths. He begins by quoting the relevant biblical texts and the halakha enshrined by Hazal (*Bava Kamma* 83b) that the law imposes monetary compensation rather than actually exacting physical damage. Is this view *peshat* in the verses?

He offers a close textual reading of the biblical passages that contain the law "eye for an eye" (Exod. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:15-21; Deut. 19:19-21). Presumably, the items on the list such as "life for a life, wound for a wound," and the others should all either be literal or figurative. How can "life for a life" be literal, if the case in Exodus 21 refers to a disputant who strikes and fatally harms a pregnant woman? There was no intent to kill her, and there does not appear to be intent even to kill the other disputant (see *Sanhedrin* 79a-b). The Torah imposes the death penalty only for

intentional murder. If “life for a life” is not intended as literal, then it is likely that the rest of the clauses are also not literal and would refer to monetary compensation.

R. Shamah then traces the arguments of Hazal, R. Saadya, Ibn Ezra, and Rambam as they adduce text evidence in favor of the halakhic reading of the verse. Ibn Ezra and Rambam grant that the case cannot be textually proven and therefore we must ultimately rely on rabbinic tradition in addition to textual arguments.

After his survey of Hazal and *parshanut*, R. Shamah turns to the ancient Near Eastern context. In the earliest extant legal codes such as the Eshnuna Laws, bodily harm was viewed as a personal family matter and families settled on a price for the damages between themselves. Hammurabi’s Code (18th century B.C.E.) elevated bodily mutilation into a criminal offense and ruled “eye for an eye.” This legislation was an attempt to bring equity to a system that previously was open to abuse when left to the judgment of individuals. However, Hammurabi applied the principle of talion only to the upper class. Many scholars believe that Hammurabi’s courts never actually removed an eye for someone’s eye, but this formulation was intended to elevate bodily harm into a criminal offense with a more objective standard of justice.

The earlier text and *parshanut* analysis pointed in the direction of “eye for an eye” referring to monetary compensation, though the case could not be conclusively proven. With knowledge of the Near Eastern development of this law, it appears even more likely that the Torah never intended “eye for an eye” to mean that we actually should remove an eye. Rather, it always meant monetary compensation. The Torah echoed the law of Hammurabi, but made the principle democratic—it is a criminal offense to poke out anyone’s eye, not just someone from the upper class. The Torah teaches that we must apply one law to all.¹⁰

D. SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

R. Shamah often offers symbolic-conceptual understandings of laws and narratives. For example, at the burning bush, God assures Moses that the Israelites will listen to him (Exod. 3:18). However, Moses displays little

¹⁰ See further discussions in Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 125-127; William H. Propp, *Anchor Bible 2A: Exodus 19-40* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 227-231.

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confidence in the people, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?” (Exod. 4:1). God responds with two signs: the staff becomes a serpent and reverts to being a staff; and then Moses puts his hand in his bosom, it contracts *tsaraat*, and then it is restored after he returns his hand to his bosom (Exod. 4:2-7).

Is there symbolic meaning in these particular signs? Several midrashim criticize Moses for doubting God’s explicit assurances that the Israelites would believe him (see, for example, *Shabbat* 97a; *Exod. Rabba* 3:12; *Deut. Rabba* 9:6). Therefore, God showed him a serpent who was menacing, and also a reminder of the snake from Eden who was guilty of abuse of speech. Moreover, God afflicted Moses with *tsaraat*, hinting at the sin of *leshon ha-ra*.

R. Shamah quotes R. Solomon Sassoon, who suggests that Moses’ staff symbolizes leadership and power. It turns into a serpent, teaching that power comes with the danger of corruption. God instructs Moses to grab it by its tail rather than its neck. Grabbing a serpent by the neck is a means of overpowering it, whereas grabbing it by the tail teaches Moses that he must trust God and constantly be on guard not to be bitten. Moses’ placing his hand in his bosom suggests that a leader must never get lulled into complacency. If a leader keeps his or her hands out of the fray, that too is destructive, and this is symbolized by the *tsaraat* (271-272).

E. NUMBER PATTERNS

R. Shamah makes extensive use of number patterns, particularly pertaining to eight and thirteen. He quotes R. Solomon Sassoon, who maintained that patterns of seven represent the “old” way of thinking whereas eight represents the covenant and thirteen is the *gematria* of *ehad* (1057-1066).

For example, the first narrative of Jacob’s name change (Gen. 32:28-29) contains the 80th reference in the Torah to the name Jacob when it appears without any prefix. When God again announces his name change (Gen. 35:10-11), the last Jacob reference before the name change is the 130th overall mention of the name Jacob in the Torah, including those references with prefixes (158).

R. Shamah also detects a pattern of twenty-six with regard to the revelation of God’s Name Y-H-V-H, whose *gematria* is twenty-six. From God’s declaration *ani Hashem* (Exod. 6:2), God’s Name without any prefix appears 2,600 times in the Torah through the Former Prophets.

From the next mention (Exod. 6:3), God's Name without a prefix appears through the Torah 1,352 times, or 26×52 . The total number of verses in the Torah where God's Name appears without a prefix is 1,326, or 26×51 . In the Torah plus Former Prophets, the total is 2,340, or 26×90 . Several other multiples of twenty-six also are evident.

R. Shamah uses these number patterns to demonstrate the great care in the transmission of the text of the Torah despite the existence of textual variants; that prophetically revealed Scripture is different from human literature; and that the books of the Torah and the Former Prophets are intimately linked (282-283).

On the one hand, the statistical likelihood of some of these patterns may indeed be very small—and this is the assumption on which R. Shamah bases himself. However, there are at least two methodological difficulties that make many of these patterns difficult to accept as compelling. First, some of the criteria appear haphazard. Counting some words without prefixes and others with prefixes, or counting from different starting points within a passage, detracts from the overall likelihood that these patterns were intended by the Torah.

Additionally, the patterns would be more convincing if it could be demonstrated that they are predictable. For example, if we were to take covenant narratives such as the *berit bein ha-betarim*, *mattan Torah*, Gerizim and Ebal, and others, would we be able to anticipate patterns of eight or thirteen before we conduct elaborate computer searches? Would we expect these passages to contain the 80th reference (or some other significant multiple) in the Torah to its most important terms?

To find numerical patterns is impressive but does not prove the point, since there could be many other references to covenants without multiples of eight or thirteen. Hopefully those dedicated students of R. Sassoon's approach will test their findings to determine if the patterns they have found are predictable and therefore more meaningful and compelling.

HOTLY DEBATED HASHKAFIC ISSUES

R. Shamah espouses two positions which likely will arouse controversy in the Orthodox world. One reflects a methodological stance: R. Shamah proffers non-literal readings for several narratives. The other reflects the core of our belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, as he makes comments pertaining to the authorship of the Torah. We will briefly explore each, and their impact on the commentary as a whole.

A. NON-LITERAL READINGS

R. Shamah adopts non-literal readings when the details of the stories do not appear to work out smoothly. He understands the narratives of the Creation (10), Eden (21), Cain and Abel (25), Abraham's encounters with the angels in Genesis 18 (79-80), and Balaam's talking donkey (796) as allegories or parables. R. Shamah notes the obvious difficulties one encounters by taking these stories literally: talking animals, God's appearing to Abraham as a man, and details such as Cain's wife or his building a city though there should not have been many people yet to populate it. R. Shamah does not appeal to known traditional precedents to justify his approach nor does he make an issue out of it. He simply presents his views matter-of-factly.

Three hashkafic considerations must be raised: (1) Is there any inherent problem in suggesting that a story in the Torah should not be understood literally? (2) Does such a suggestion change the overall meaning of a story? (3) How far may one extend this approach?—i.e., the slippery slope argument.

The debate over interpreting texts as non-literal has a long history in our tradition.¹¹ Rambam maintained that if logic or scientific knowledge contradicts the literal sense of a biblical text, that text must not be taken literally:

I believe every possible happening that is supported by a prophetic statement and do not strip it of its plain meaning. I fall back on interpreting a statement only when its literal sense is impossible, like the corporeality of God: the possible however remains as stated (*Treatise on Resurrection*).¹²

Rambam included considerably more than God's corporeality among the "impossible." Consequently, he allegorized many biblical passages, and several later commentators followed his lead. At the same time, others strongly objected to the doors Rambam had opened. A recent disagreement in *Tradition* over the suggestion of a non-literal interpretation of the

¹¹ See Joshua L. Golding, "On the Limits of Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 10 (2001), 37-59.

¹² Translation from *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, Abraham S. Halkin, trans. and D. Hartman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 228. For further discussion of Rambam's position, see Hayyim Angel, "Rambam's Continued Impact on Underlying Issues in *Tanakh* Study," in *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community*, ed. Yamin Levy & Shalom Carmy (Brooklyn: Yashar Books, 2006), 148-164; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), 35-55.

early Genesis narratives illustrates that this issue continues to be hotly debated into the 21st century.¹³

For the most part, R. Shamah's stance does not significantly affect how one would understand each story. The religious lessons derived from the narratives of Creation, Eden, Cain and Abel, and others can be identical whether one accepts them as historical events or as allegories or parables conveying the same lessons. As Rambam said regarding his reading of the Book of Job:

To sum up: *whether he has existed or not*, with regard to cases like his, which always exist, all reflecting people become perplexed; and in consequence such things as I have already mentioned to you are said about God's knowledge and His providence (*Guide* III:22).¹⁴

An exception where a non-literal reading affects message and content is the Cain and Abel narrative (25-26). Although Cain committed intentional murder, God decreed exile on Cain instead of death. Several commentators explain that Cain had committed the world's first murder and therefore was judged for manslaughter since he did not know better (Radak, Cassuto).

R. Shamah, however, insists that the story is an allegory and must reflect the values of the period when it was written, at which point murder was a capital crime. R. Shamah suggests that the narrative teaches that in an ideal sense, the Torah prefers the remorse reflected by Cain (Gen. 4:13) and rehabilitation rather than capital punishment. Although capital punishment became enshrined as law, R. Shamah observes that later rabbinical courts imposed it very seldom (*Makkot* 7a).

It is difficult to consider this reading as *peshat* in the Cain and Abel narrative. A non-literal reading has greater plausibility when it matches the plain sense of the text. If one projects additional meaning onto a non-literal reading, the judgment of the interpreter ultimately is displayed more than the primary meaning of the text.

Even granting that it is acceptable to take as non-literal the creation narrative or a talking donkey, how far may one apply this methodology? For the most part, R. Shamah follows Rambam's approach stated above

¹³ Shubert Spero, "The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: Story or Metaphor?" *Tradition* 33:2 (Winter 1999), 5-18, and "Communications" in 34:1 (Spring 2000), 111-118; Joel Wolowelsky, "A Note on the Flood Story in the Language of Man," *Tradition* 42:3 (Fall 2009), 41-48, and "Communications" in 42:4 (Winter 2009), 101-104; 43:1 (Spring 2010), 87-89.

¹⁴ Translation from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 486.

and does not question the historicity of the Torah's narratives. One passage is particularly relevant to this discussion.

When discussing the census in Numbers chapter 1, R. Shamah begins with a section entitled "Literal or Nonliteral?" (695-699). He examines number patterns that appear typological, and confronts the difficulty that, based on a literal reading of the Torah's numbers, there would be only one firstborn son for every fifty-four males in the nation.¹⁵ He quotes R. Solomon Sassoon, who believed that these numbers were symbolic. In a footnote, R. Shamah observes that R. Sassoon was aware that interpreting the tribal counts as non-literal also could potentially reduce the historical-critical questions pertaining to a population of approximately two million moving across the desert without leaving an archaeological trace; the absence of any mention of the exodus in other literatures; and the archaeological record in Israel that we have found which suggests a considerably smaller population at the time of Joshua. However, R. Sassoon based his symbolic interpretation solely on the number patterns in the Torah itself and not on these historical questions, since we do not have all the relevant archaeological information to arrive at absolute conclusions.

B. REVELATION OF THE TORAH

It may very well be that modern scholarship has established that there were early sources prior to any biblical writings that underlie the current text. There may have been what we can call "early drafts" (xx).

R. Shamah posits that we must strive to understand the Masoretic text as it stands and view it as prophetically inspired. The most substantive discussion of the Torah's authorship in the body of the commentary appears in Parashat Balak (800-801) where R. Shamah explores the curious talmudic statement, "Moses wrote his book, Parashat Balaam, and the Book of Job" (*Bava Batra* 14b). R. Shamah suggests that Hazal may have listed the section of Balaam separately from the rest of the Torah because it is a self-contained unit that stands apart from the flow of the Numbers narratives. Perhaps Hazal were concerned that some might think that Moses did not write this section, so they corrected this view by insisting that Moses did receive divine revelation of this narrative along with the rest of the Torah.

¹⁵ R. Elhanan Samet quotes several attempts to solve this problem but ultimately leaves it unresolved (*Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavua* [first series] vol. 2 [in Hebrew] ed. Ayal Fishler [Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002], 156-167).

R. Shamah then explores the potential validity of what those possibly rejected by Hazal may have thought. May one believe that the section on Balaam or other parts of the Torah were revealed to a prophet other than Moses? He refers to the passage in *Sanhedrin*:

Another [Baraita] taught: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord” (Num. 15:31)—this refers to him who maintains that the Torah is not from Heaven. And even if he asserts that the whole Torah is from Heaven, excepting a particular verse, which [he maintains] was not uttered by God but by Moses himself, he is included in “because he has despised the word of the Lord” (*Sanhedrin* 99a).

He quotes R. Solomon Sassoon, who interprets this passage to mean that Jewish faith insists that God revealed the entire Torah prophetically, but not necessarily to Moses. If one believes that Moses or someone else wrote a verse in the Torah on his own and not through prophetic revelation, that is beyond the belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim*.

The same three hashkafic considerations must be raised: (1) Is there any inherent problem in suggesting that a passage in the Torah was revealed to a prophet after Moses? (2) Does such a suggestion in any way change the overall meaning of the Torah or the passage in question? (3) How far may one extend this approach?—i.e., the slippery slope argument.

While some maintain that small portions of the Torah were written by later prophets through revelation, this point has long been debated in rabbinic tradition. Marc Shapiro surveys rabbinic views, demonstrating that Jewish teaching on this subject is not monolithic.¹⁶ R. Yitzchak Blau offers a cogent critique of Shapiro’s analysis. While it is important to note that there is a range of traditional viewpoints, it remains critical to draw wider boundaries that incorporate the various positions since there still is a common denominator regarding the classical Jewish belief in God’s revelation of the Torah to Moses.¹⁷

R. Mordechai Breuer rejected the position that the Torah should be viewed as post-Mosaic prophecy. While that view accepts prophetic revelation, it is inconsistent with what Jews historically believed, namely, that

¹⁶ Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford, UK; Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 91-121.

¹⁷ R. Yitzchak Blau, “Flexibility with a Firm Foundation: On Maintaining Jewish Dogma,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 12 (2004), 179-191.

God revealed the Torah to Moses. R. Breuer also maintains that this view is based on a mistaken understanding of *Torah min ha-Shamayim*. That term does not simply mean “prophetic revelation,” and we would not similarly say that the Book of Isaiah is *min ha-Shamayim*. *Torah min ha-Shamayim* refers exclusively to the Torah, whose level of divine revelation infinitely transcends that of other prophecy. R. Breuer realizes that, even though this belief is inconsistent with classical Jewish faith, individuals who espouse this position love the Torah and accept its prophetic claim on our lives.¹⁸

In response to R. Breuer, Israel Knohl noted that there are views in Hazal and later commentators which accept the possibility of later glosses. While he concedes that these later glosses comprise a tiny percentage of the Torah, it demonstrates the fundamental point that there were great rabbis who did not feel that *Torah min ha-Shamayim* was compromised by having words of later prophets interspersed with the revelation to Moses. R. Breuer insists that one cannot equate the views of Rishonim who allow for later minor glosses with the views of those contemporary scholars who insist that most or all of the Torah was written by prophets later than Moses. Great rabbis such as Ibn Ezra and R. Yehuda he-Hasid granted that later prophets prophetically added these minor glosses. But their position is fundamentally different from saying that the *entire* Torah is comprised of later glosses by prophets.¹⁹

Regardless of how one defines these critical hashkafic boundaries, R. Shamah treats the Torah’s text as unified and as prophetically revealed. Even though R. Breuer maintained that this hashkafic position was beyond the boundaries of classical Jewish faith, he recognized that one may benefit and be inspired from such authors since they believe in prophetic revelation and read the Torah as a unified text.

To conclude this discussion, the boundaries of non-literal readings and the nature of the revelation of the Torah have been hotly debated through the ages. As a practical matter, R. Shamah’s commentary very seldom is affected in any meaningful way.²⁰ People espousing diverse

¹⁸ R. Mordechai Breuer, “On Bible Criticism” [in Hebrew], *Megadim* 30 (1999), 97-107.

¹⁹ Israel Knohl, “Between Faith and Criticism” [in Hebrew], *Megadim* 33 (2001), 123-126; and R. Breuer’s response, 127-132.

²⁰ There are a few instances where R. Shamah understands one passage in the Torah as being later than another, serving as a form of “midrash” on the earlier passage (e.g., 309-310; 364-371). Depending on what he means by “later,” these studies may be examples where the outcome of one’s analysis does depend on the process of writing the Torah.

positions on this spectrum of belief and methodology may benefit from R. Shamah's analysis even if they reject his underlying assumptions.

CONCLUSION

R. Shamah's commentary consistently focuses on the religious obligation to take Tanakh learning seriously at the level of *peshat*. In doing so, he models the approach taken by Malbim in his introduction to the Song of Songs:

Most interpretations [of Song of Songs]...are in the realm of allusion and *derush*; distant from the settlement of *peshat*... Of course we affirm that divine words have seventy facets and one thousand dimensions. Nonetheless, the *peshat* interpretation is the beginning of knowledge; it is the key to open the gates, before we can enter the sacred inner chambers of the King.

Notwithstanding the caveats explored in this review, the commentary is of immense value to scholars and laypeople alike. We are grateful to R. Shamah for his monumental work, which hopefully will aid many people in accessing the keys to the palace gates as we encounter God through His revealed word in the Torah.