



Ani Maamin

Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth,
and the Thirteen Principles of Faith





Joshua Berman

ANI MAAMIN

*Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth,
and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*

Maggid Books

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First Edition, 2020

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

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The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-538-1, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

על בנינו ועל דורותינו, ועל כל דורות
... for our children, for our generations, and for all generations ...

*Explore the world and explore Torah.
And when approaching Torah,
"Turn it over, and turn it over, for all is therein...
become gray and old therein...
do not move away from it,
for you have no better portion than it."
(Pirkei Avot 5:22)*

Annette and Mitch Eichen





Dedicated to

Mr & Mrs Michael and Hilda Aaronson

*whose love and dedication to their children
are an inspiration and a signal of transcendence.*



Author's Dedication

In dedication to
Rabbi Yakov Bieler
my first rebbe



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Acknowledgments

The Mishna in Avot (1:6) tells us, “Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend.” Teachers we look up to for guidance and wisdom; friends we look out to for camaraderie and companionship. Over the years, I have made many friends and colleagues – as a student at Princeton, while learning at Yeshivat Har Etzion, as a professor at Bar-Ilan University, and in my hometown of Beit Shemesh. During the composition of this book, many of these friends became my teachers. Researching and writing outside of my field of biblical studies mandated that I seek out their wisdom and learning for various chapters of this book, especially those that address the Thirteen Principles of Faith. There is a special *nachas* that one feels when the reciprocal and bilateral nature of friendship gives way to a sense of hierarchy, and you become the beneficiary of a friend’s specialized wisdom. It is the *nachas* of your friend becoming, for a moment, your *rebbe*, your teacher. For their willingness to read and critique my work, I would like to thank Yitzchak Blau, Michael Broyde, Eli Clark, Adam Ferziger, Yoel Finkelman, Yehuda Galinsky, David Henshke, Aton Holzer, Eric Lawee, Marc Shapiro, Moshe Shoshan, Gil Student, Chaim Waxman, and Jeffrey Wolf. The generosity of their time, however, should not be construed as approval or agreement with all that I have written here, and I alone am responsible for the arguments contained in this book.

There is a special group of people I wish to thank, who have no idea how much they have given me through their personal example and through hours and hours of heartfelt conversation. Without them, simply, I could not have written this book. These are individuals who have shown me what it is to be a person of deep faith and deep scholarly integrity. These are people who are unafraid of speaking truth to power and who are my comrades in arms in combating some of the erroneous paradigms that prevail in the field of biblical studies. My thanks to Richard Averbeck, John Bergsma, Daniel Block, Jens Bruun Kofoed, Georg Fischer SJ, Jim Hoffmeier, Benjamin Kilchör, Michael LeFebvre, Sandra Richter, Jean-Pierre Sonnet SJ, John Welch, Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, and Markus Zehnder. Following Numbers 10:31, I say to you all, “You have shown me how to camp in the wilderness, and you have served as eyes for me.”¹

Sections of this book have appeared in slightly altered form elsewhere, and I would like to acknowledge the original forums in which these materials appeared. Chapters 1 and 4 and the first part of chapter 6 originally appeared within an eight-part series that I published on Orthodoxy and biblical criticism on the website of Gil Student, torahmusings.com. Chapter 3 appeared originally as “Was There an Exodus?” in *Mosaic* magazine.² The latter part of chapter 6 is taken from my essay, “What Is This Thing Called Law?” which appeared in *Mosaic* magazine.³ Chapter 7 appeared originally as “How the Torah Revolutionized Political Thought” on Aish HaTorah’s website, aish.com.⁴ Chapter 11, with slight modification, appeared as “Orthodox Rabbinic Exceptions to the Thirteen Principles of Faith: The Dynamics of Boundary Permeability” in *Modern Judaism*.⁵

1. All translations of biblical passages are my own in consultation with existing translations.
2. March 2, 2015, available at <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/history-ideas/2015/03/was-there-an-exodus/>.
3. December 1, 2013, available at <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/uncategorized/2013/12/what-is-this-thing-called-law/>.
4. December 29, 2012, available at <https://www.aish.com/sp/ph/How-the-Torah-Revolutionized-Political-Thought.html>.
5. Joshua Berman, “Orthodox Rabbinic Exception to the Thirteen Principles of Faith: The Dynamics of Boundary Permeability,” *Modern Judaism* 39, no. 2 (2019): 161–83.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Matthew Miller and Reuven Ziegler of Koren Publishers for their enthusiastic support of this project and for enabling this dream to come true for me. My thanks also to Deena Glickman for her scrupulous editing of my manuscript, as well as to managing editor Ita Olesker, proofreader Tali Simon, and indexer Reuben Meghnagi. Special thanks to Mitch and Annette Eichen and to Edward Aaronson for sharing my vision for this project and for offering their generous support.

At the age of fourteen, I began studies at the Ramaz Upper School in New York and was placed in Rabbi Yakov Bieler's Gemara class. The chemistry with the class was special and we had the good fortune of having Rabbi Bieler as our *rebbe* for the full four years of high school. We learned Gemara, but even more than that, we learned what it was to be an *eved Hashem*, as much through who he was as through what he said and taught. At a time when it was becoming fashionable for teachers to project chumminess, Rabbi Bieler radiated dignity and gravity. Where other teachers wanted to instill a love of Torah, Rabbi Bieler sought to instill within us a reverence for Torah. Where other teachers did what they could to make the Torah accessible, Rabbi Bieler preached the value of *amelut baTorah*, toiling in Torah. Our work, he promised, would be difficult but rewarding. And it is my prayer that readers of this book will share that experience as well. In Rabbi Bieler's class, challenging topics were never avoided and complexity was embraced. Forty years on, it is a privilege to dedicate this work to him.



Introduction

As Pinhas bared his soul to me, I could see he was a man of courage. Visiting with his wife and family from the United States, he had walked for more than an hour from the other side of Beit Shemesh on a blistering Shabbat afternoon to speak with me in our home. But his journey had begun long before that. Pinhas had received a typical Orthodox upbringing, attending twelve years of yeshiva day school followed by yeshiva study in Israel. He had rebelled at one point, but it meant that when he returned to *yiddishkeit*, he did so out of choice. He had given deep thought to what it all meant, and that made his commitment to Torah and mitzvot all the more profound. Now in his mid-thirties, Pinhas was an ordained *musmakh* and a passionately committed educator.

For Pinhas, the desire to know and understand was part and parcel of his *avodat Hashem*. An eclectic reader, Pinhas stumbled onto academic approaches to the Tanakh. Scholars, he saw, raised interesting and valid questions about the Torah, questions he had never heard raised by his teachers and *rebbeim*. Though he searched, he could not find answers within classical rabbinic sources that he felt were satisfactory. Pinhas found himself in an unfamiliar place: deeply committed to his *yiddishkeit*, but troubled by gnawing questions that would not disappear. “I lose sleep over these questions,” he confided.

“Even worse, I feel dishonest. Outwardly I affirm all sorts of things in my *davening* and when I’m standing before kids teaching. Inwardly, though, I struggle.”

Over the past several years it has been my highest calling to oblige people like Pinhas, people driven by an intense desire for religious and spiritual integrity, who have sought my counsel, sometimes in my living room, sometimes in the local branch of Aroma Espresso Bar, sometimes as a “guest” in their home via Skype. I receive a steady stream of emails from individuals, young and old, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Jewish and even non-Jewish, seeking guidance on how to understand the relationship between what they were taught in piety and the troubling questions they face from their encounter with academic biblical studies. In this volume, I share my own strivings for such integrity as a scholar and as an *eved Hashem*.

The subject is threatening to some. Many rabbis and educators would not dare broach this topic for themselves, and certainly not with their students and congregants. This is indeed sensitive and at times complex material. And we have a long-standing tradition that difficult issues in halakha and religious worldview are often best handled discreetly, on an individual basis, each according to his or her need and understanding, and not in published form. But there are times in the life of the community when we come to what I would term a “tipping point.” This is the point at which a sensitive issue has begun to gain traction. What once vexed only scattered individuals now troubles a small but growing part of the community. The cost of not publicly addressing the issue begins to outweigh the cost of confronting the issue in the open. In this situation, the smart money says that bold leaders will emerge winners by taking the lead on the issue, and “owning it,” as it were, controlling the communal agenda and helping to offer guidance.

Educators often fear that raising anything associated with academic biblical studies in the classroom will cause more harm than good. My experience and that of many other educators suggests otherwise. I smile when a student in a gap year program says to me, “Oh, I’m not bothered by biblical criticism; my *rebbe* talked to us about that in high school.” Did her teacher raise – let alone solve – the entire gamut of challenges that academic biblical studies raises? I doubt it. But young men

and women who express this sentiment remind us of something very important: when a young mind is first introduced to anything relating to academic biblical studies by a beloved and trusted educator, it sends the message that we need not be afraid. Ninety percent of the battle is already won, and the chances that that student will experience a crisis of faith later on are diminished. We sabotage our best educational efforts when we pretend critical approaches to the Bible do not exist, and therefore need not even be acknowledged. When our more thoughtful students discover these alternative approaches – often after they have left Orthodox educational environments – they arrive at a reasonable conclusion: if my teachers never acknowledged any of this, it must be because the tradition has nothing to say in its defense. Worse, they feel hoodwinked, wondering why the wool was pulled over their eyes. With courage and resources, educators can make a huge difference by demonstrating even slight familiarity with some of the methods and claims of the academy. The motto of the New York State Lottery circa 1980 is equally apt here: you gotta be in it to win it.

The Orthodox engagement with the challenges of biblical criticism today is more robust than any since prewar Germany. To my mind, however, the current state of the discussion is deficient in four respects.

First, I am troubled by the blind and obsequious manner in which some in the Orthodox world view the authority of the academy as the repository of ultimate truth. We find individuals who identify as Orthodox and proclaim acceptance of “the findings of biblical criticism,” with no attendant caveat of what they *do not* accept. Let me be clear: I am not speaking about a failure to establish theological red lines. What I mean is that in some quarters there is no critical eye turned on the criticism itself. Everything is accepted in the name of truth, but nothing is rejected in the name of truth. “The findings of biblical criticism” are embraced whole hog, as it were. Go to the major academic conferences in biblical studies and you will see that there is hardly a conclusion anymore that is accepted consensus. The field is more fractured concerning its most basic methodologies and conclusions than ever before. Ironically, there is far more criticism of “the findings of biblical criticism” among the critics themselves than there is in certain corners of the halakhically observant community.

Now, one could say in their defense that lay individuals are not trained biblicists; they are not privy to the latest debates in the top journals of the field. It is unfair to expect non-specialists to articulate learned positions about such things. But this apology veils a deeper spiritual and cognitive malady. Today some are prepared to pledge their unflinching allegiance to any position of the academy, because by doing so they demonstrate their autonomy from tradition, and ostensibly their commitment to the pursuit of truth. As a teacher at a Jewish day school once put it to me: “Often, I find that students might not be so well informed about the meaning of a scientific or archaeological claim. It’s enough that many academics holding respected titles have advanced a certain way of understanding something.” When individuals assume that every utterance of a rabbinic figure on any subject – even beyond issues of Jewish learning – is authoritative by virtue of his Torah learning, we arrive at the problem called *Daas Torah*. When other individuals are prepared to accept “the findings of biblical criticism,” but cannot state the academic positions they find suspect, when they fawn over academics because of the titles they bear, without checking whether cultural presuppositions and ideological biases have colored their interpretations, we arrive at a similar problem – *Daas Mada*.¹

Second, the state of Orthodoxy’s encounter with biblical criticism is deficient because it is engaged begrudgingly, solely through a defensive posture as a fulfillment of R. Elazar’s dictum, *Da mah lehashiv la’epikoros*, “Know what to retort to the heretic” (Mishna Avot 2:14).² Instead, Orthodoxy should celebrate the insights afforded by understanding the Torah in its ancient Near Eastern context. The light this context sheds is not on a small detail here or there. Rather, a wide array of dazzling insights emerges – insights that can be harmonized with traditional teachings, as I hope this book will demonstrate. If there are indeed seventy *panim*, or “faces,” to the Torah, its ancient Near Eastern context is one of them. If

1. Elsewhere I have expanded upon the corrupting role of culture and intellectual currents in influencing the field of biblical studies. See my essay, “The Corruption of Biblical Studies,” *Mosaic*, July 10, 2017, available at <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2017/07/the-corruption-of-biblical-studies/>.
2. All translations of mishnaic and talmudic literature in this volume are my own in consultation with existing translations.

we see scant sign of this in our classical sources, it is only because these ancient texts were largely hidden from our Sages – indeed as they were from critical scholarship – until the late nineteenth century. We should view the merit to develop and appreciate these insights as an opportunity granted to our generation.

Third, the state of the discussion concerning Orthodoxy and its relationship with biblical criticism is deficient because published contributions on the topic are universally brief – either in essay or blog form. This book is the first effort by a single author to address these issues in a full-length monograph. The comprehensive analysis afforded by a lengthy treatment is crucial, because so many of the issues in this inquiry are interconnected. Consider the question of the historical accuracy of the Torah’s account of the Exodus. One can indeed pen a single essay that summarizes the evidence for and against. But that will hardly do the issue justice, because to understand how the Torah reports the event of the Exodus, we need to understand how the cultures of the ancient world reported historical events generally. This in turn begs the question of whether it is appropriate to view the Torah – ostensibly a timeless document – in ancient context. And so a discussion of the Exodus account’s historical accuracy really requires three interrelated discussions. Only a full-length volume allows treatment of the issues and their interdependence with a consistent and coherent voice.

Fourth and finally, the state of Orthodox engagement with biblical criticism is deficient because it has run roughshod over a subtle, rarely discussed, but crucial factor: the factor of *locale*, where the discussions are held. Over years of discussing these issues I have discovered that looking at the same sources and the same evidence, Orthodox Jews in America speaking English and Israeli Orthodox Jews speaking Hebrew carry on different sorts of conversations about these issues. Consider the American term “Centrist Orthodoxy.” The term reflects the reality that this expression of Orthodoxy, now more than a century old, has always had competition. From the left, alternative expressions of Judaism have long posed theological competition, and these liberal movements have jockeyed with Centrist Orthodoxy for adherents. Meanwhile, Centrist Orthodoxy has also had to look over its right shoulder, no less. For a generation now, more right-wing expressions of Orthodoxy have also

provided Centrist Orthodoxy with theological competition and a contest for adherents. The result is that public discussion of hot-button issues within Centrist Orthodox circles is often stifled and limited. Thinkers and writers rightfully feel compelled to establish clear and strong boundaries between themselves and the movements to the left. There are many Orthodox Jews who believe that even addressing the issue of Orthodoxy and biblical criticism implicitly serves liberal agendas. The fear is not without basis. Find a website that discusses Orthodoxy and also eagerly embraces biblical criticism and you are likely to find elsewhere on that website entries that challenge rabbinic authority and call for a liberalization of halakhic practice. Helpful and creative positions that might be supported by a new reading of the sources are rejected, or never even stated, because they seem to play into the agenda of the competition to the left.

Meanwhile, looking to their right, Centrist Orthodox thinkers and writers will fear – again, legitimately – being pegged by the right as being too left-wing. The claim, “I believe *x*, but if I say so publicly, I’ll create *shiddukh* (matchmaking) problems for my daughter” is but one symptom of this dynamic. Centrist Orthodoxy is where Orthodoxy’s most fruitful thinking could come from, on a range of sensitive issues. But precisely by virtue of its being in the center, it is boxed in by socio-religious forces that stifle broad and open conversation.

Contrast this with the situation in Israel. Indeed, there is much in common between the attitudes and theological proclivities of Centrist Orthodox authorities in the United States and Religious Zionist thinkers and leaders in Israel. Religious Zionism, however, has never termed itself “Centrist” Orthodoxy. Indeed, within the Israeli socio-religious landscape it occupies no “center” in the way that Centrist Orthodoxy does in North America. Religious Zionist thinkers and leaders have no need to consider ideological threats from movements just to the right or just to the left. In Israel, there is practically no competition for adherents that equals the challenges facing Centrist Orthodoxy in North America. The result is that on a range of hot-button issues, Religious Zionist leaders and thinkers often entertain ideas and positions that would be non-starters in the English-speaking world.

Some conclude that when Centrist Orthodox figures consider the threats from the right and from the left as they formulate halakha,

or as they articulate points of theology, they are wrongly engaging in “politics.” They say that we should simply read the sources, and let the chips fall where they may. I reject this approach. I take it as axiomatic that the needs of the community are part and parcel of both the halakhic and the theological rabbinic tradition. From time immemorial, different authorities at different times have come to different halakhic and theological conclusions on the basis of the very same rabbinic sources, because of the needs of their respective times and places. Therefore, in our own time as well we need to be open to the possibility that on a range of issues – halakhic and theological – decisions taken by authorities and communities in one locale might not be appropriate for those in another.

While some will agree that it is high time for Orthodoxy to address the claims of academic biblical studies, they may well ask: How can the material in this volume be trusted? After all, I am an Orthodox rabbi; surely my viewpoint is biased. The question is an important and legitimate one, and begs a discussion about motivation and bias in academic research more generally. Feminist scholars write from a feminist perspective; disabled scholars write from the perspective of disability studies; scholars produce work so that it will find favor in the eyes of their thesis advisors or defend claims they made in earlier publications. There is no end to the possible motivations that drive scholars to produce their work. Ultimately, motivation and agendas are entirely irrelevant when determining the quality of academic work; articles undergo blind peer review, and with very good reason. Academic arguments must rise or fall solely upon the rational and critical merits of the claims based on the evidence. The scholarly positions I stake out in this book have all been previously published in the most distinguished forums within the field of biblical studies. Does this mean that most scholars in the field have read my work and adopted my positions? It does not. But it does mean that a wide range of scholars who do not share my affiliation and orientation have vetted these arguments and have found them worthy of scholarly attention and discussion. Looking in from the outside, lay-people may conjure an image of biblicists as a guild with a strong set of conclusions that are accepted truths. The fact of the matter is that today there is robust debate within biblical studies about nearly every major issue – even ones that were long thought to have been settled.

In this book I make no effort to be comprehensive in the range of issues I raise, nor exhaustive about the evidence I adduce. To do so would require many volumes. Instead, I address the issues that I sense are of greatest concern to the types of people that over the years have turned to me for guidance. I present academic arguments in ways that will allow the layman to follow without getting bogged down in detail, with a premium on covering ground. I do not think of my work here as *the* definitive Orthodox standpoint. Rather, I hope readers will view these sources and arguments as resources as they arrive at their own conclusions to the issues. For those wishing to see fuller presentations of the evidence, or alternative views within the scholarship, I provide references to my academic publications where these can be found.

As I mentioned earlier, our engagement with texts and concepts from the ancient Near East opens up new vistas for us, shedding great light on previously hidden aspects of the Torah. But there is one aspect of this type of study that I find absolutely exhilarating both as a scholar and as a Jew, and it is something that we will see again and again throughout this book. Here is an illustration of the type of inquiry I have in mind, from an example outside of biblical studies.

Consider this: When did Jews who endured the Holocaust first become survivors? The question borders on the absurd. What answer could one give to such a question? At the moment they were liberated? From the moment the war ended? From the moment they arrived in a new land? But more than anything else, the question seems absurd, because it is just obvious: Jews who endured the Holocaust are survivors. They just are.

But it turns out that Jews who endured the Holocaust really did not become survivors until the late 1970s. By that I mean that until then, it was actually unusual for such Jews to be called *survivors*. When Jews first reached the shores of the United States from the horrors of wartime Europe, they were referred to with any number of designations: *refugees*, *displaced persons*, *liberated prisoners*, *immigrants*, *greenhorns*, or the Yiddish version, *greene*. The refugees kept a low profile, focusing on building new lives and fitting in. Those around them did not want to hear their stories, and encouraged them to Americanize. Rarely were they called *survivors*.

The watershed moment came in 1978, when the television mini-series *Holocaust* was broadly viewed by millions of Americans. Interest grew in the historical plight of an oppressed group of people.³ The various labels referred to earlier all bore connotations of passivity and victimhood. Now able to share their collective story in prime time, Jews could highlight and share their trauma. The process allowed Jews to take back their power and strength, and the new way of thinking about such Jews was not as immigrants, but as *survivors*, a term that connotes resilience, perseverance, and even ingenuity. With so few survivors remaining today, we are filled with an ever-greater sense of reverence for them and their heroism. Their stories are for us sacrosanct. It seems so natural to us to view them this way that it is difficult to imagine that it was ever any other way. But it truly was. And only by appreciating the gulf between our perceptions and those of earlier generations can we grasp just how limited our perspective is.

I cite this example because it powerfully illustrates what we will see again and again throughout this book. Ideas and terms that we take for granted as obvious, universal, and timeless turn out, upon inspection, to be contingent, a function of time and place. We suddenly realize that what seemed obvious to us was only so because we see things through the limited fishbowl of our own lives and our own world. We suddenly realize that once upon a time, people thought about things in a very different way.

Indeed, our forefathers in the time of the Tanakh thought and wrote in ways that differ greatly from the ways that we do. Consider the following words and concepts: *belief, law, history, author, fact, fiction, story, religion, and politics*. When did the concept of an “author” begin? Since when have humans engaged in recording “history”? We would surely say that these concepts must be nearly as old as civilized man himself. But, as we shall see, that assumption is mistaken. We routinely assume that the Tanakh is a book of *beliefs, history, and law*; that it understands clearly the difference between *fact* and *fiction*; that it is dedicated to imparting lessons about both *religion* and *politics*. In

3. Diane L. Wolf, “What’s in a Name? The Genealogy of Holocaust Identities,” *Genealogy* 1, no. 4 (2017), available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/1/4/19/pdf>.

fact, as we shall see, the Tanakh has no knowledge of even any one of them. We will see that there is no word in either biblical or talmudic Hebrew that corresponds to *any* of these terms. This is the surest sign that a conceptual gulf exists between us and our forefathers. Only once we understand what separates our world from theirs can we begin to address many of the challenges to Orthodoxy raised in its encounter with the decidedly modern field of biblical criticism. We will see that a wide range of concepts we take as simple and universal are in fact anachronistic and modern, and that these modern presuppositions – rarely recognized, but ever present – are the source of a great deal of misunderstanding about the Tanakh.

This book contains two parts. Part I is devoted to an appreciation of the Tanakh in historical context. Chapter 1, “The Rabbinic Mandate to Understand the Torah in Ancient Near Eastern Context,” sets the table for the entire section. Many of the challenges raised by critics concerning the historical accuracy and coherence of the text of the Torah emerge precisely because scholars have for too long ignored the ways and the degree to which the Torah is a literary creation of the ancient world. The questions often raised are founded on the anachronistic assumption that ancient readers and writers must have written and thought in the same ways as we do today. This chapter demonstrates that some of our greatest sages believed that aspects of the Torah could only be appreciated by understanding its ancient context, and did not see this as compromising the eternal validity of its import and message.

Chapter 2, “But Is It History? The Historical Accuracy of the Tanakh,” focuses on *how* the Tanakh relates to us the events that befell our forefathers, the rules the Tanakh employs for what it will tell us about those events. Here we will see an instance in which we become aware of the fact that ideas and concepts that we take for granted as being obvious and eternally true turn out to be a construct of our own time and place. When we are speaking of *history*, *fact*, and *fiction*, we must realize that we are utilizing modern categories of thought – categories that the modern mind has constructed. We think that history simply means a discussion of past events with factual accuracy. We assume that this history has existed for, well, all of history. But it has not. The concept *history* itself has a history and we need to understand how it came to be.

Only by doing so can we understand how our sacred sources – biblical and rabbinic – relate to us the events that befell our forefathers.

Chapter 3, “*Avadim Hayinu: Exodus, Evidence, and Scholarship*” well illustrates the lessons learned in chapter 2 about how the Tanakh relates historical events. Perhaps no issue addressed in this book has garnered as much interest – and as much angst – as the question of the historicity of the Torah’s account of the Exodus. Here I examine claims and counterclaims for the Exodus, and provide insights and comparisons with Egyptian texts that are to my mind the strongest evidence for the historicity of the Exodus.

A major point of contention for Orthodoxy is the critical claim that the Torah is riddled with inconsistencies which can only be explained as the product of irreconcilable viewpoints. Nowhere is the question of inconsistency more pressing and widespread than in the relationship between the book of Deuteronomy – *Sefer Devarim* – and the earlier books of the Torah. In serial and wholesale fashion we find that the stories and laws related in this book seem to stand at odds with earlier versions of the same stories and same laws found elsewhere in the Torah. Yet here, too, viewing the Torah in its ancient Near Eastern setting sets the entire issue in a different light. In chapter 4, “Narrative Inconsistencies: The Book of Deuteronomy and the Rest of the Torah,” I present the standard critical position concerning these seeming inconsistencies and lay bare the *academic* difficulties of that approach. From there, I introduce a particular genre of writing that is crucial for understanding the narrative discrepancies between Deuteronomy and earlier accounts in the Torah: the ancient Near Eastern treaties between sovereign and vassal kings. I demonstrate that in this literature, the vassal would routinely receive from the sovereign king differing and conflicting accounts of the history of their relationship. I explain why this was so and how it sheds light on the relationship between the narratives of Israel’s behavior in Deuteronomy and those contained in the earlier books.

Narrative inconsistencies in the Torah are not limited to the discrepancies we find between the accounts of the book of Deuteronomy and the earlier books of the Torah. Indeed, they may be found throughout the Torah, and scholars often take these inconsistencies to be signs of editing as they seek to recreate the history of the text’s development.

This approach is broadly known as *source criticism*. Many find source criticism satisfying because it strives to make sense out of passages that are difficult to understand. But how reliable is this type of inquiry? Increasingly, scholars are calling into question whether it is really possible to work back from a received text, such as the Tanakh, and recreate its prior stages of development. In chapter 5, “Critiquing Source Criticism: The Story of the Flood,” I take the parade example of source criticism – the Flood story of Genesis 6–9 – and highlight eight methodological flaws endemic to this approach.

In chapter 6, “Legal Inconsistencies: The Book of Deuteronomy and the Rest of the Torah,” I turn to the vexing question of the seeming discrepancies between laws in the Torah. My focus here will be on the book of Deuteronomy, where many mitzvot given earlier in the Torah are repeated – sometimes, as we shall see, in ways that seem incommensurate with the earlier versions of the mitzva elsewhere in the Torah. First, I will survey the approaches within rabbinic sources to the questions of legal discrepancies between the book of Deuteronomy and the other books and why many people do not find them satisfying. I will then present the source-critical approach to the issue, and note the problems inherent in that approach from within its own frames of reference – from an *academic* perspective. In the second part of the discussion, I will claim that we today use the word “law” and think of legal texts in ways that are distinctly modern and anachronistic, and I will examine legal writings from the ancient Near East to recapture how people of the time understood how law works. From there, I will move to law in the Tanakh generally and demonstrate that the lessons learned from ancient legal writings help us understand why law seems to change so often and so easily in the Tanakh. Moreover, we will see that the way in which the legal texts were read and interpreted in the time of the Tanakh is quite different from the way in which we read and interpret halakhic texts today. The chapter closes by demonstrating that the conclusions reached here are in concert with provocative comments by the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893) and Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823–1900) about the fluid and changing nature of halakha. Fluidity and change in halakha are very threatening propositions today, and for good reason. But it is important to understand how and why the

halakha evolved from a more fluid system to one that is more resistive of change, and the concepts developed in this chapter help us understand this evolution in how halakha works.

But if, indeed, the Torah must be viewed in ancient Near Eastern context – written according to the human conventions of that period – what confidence can we have that it bears a divine imprint? In chapter 7, “But Is It Divine? How the Torah Broke with Ancient Political Thought,” I reveal how understanding the Torah in ancient context also demonstrates how utterly removed it is from the norms of its time, expressing political thought that was millennia ahead of its age. In ways that were astonishingly new and counterintuitive, in ways that served the purposes of no known interest group, the political philosophy of the Torah rises like a phoenix out of the intellectual landscape of the ancient Near East. Throughout the ancient world the truth was self-evident: all men were *not* created equal. It is in the five books of the Torah that we find the birthplace of egalitarian thought. When seen against the backdrop of ancient norms, the social blueprint espoused by the Torah represents a series of quantum leaps in a sophisticated and interconnected matrix of theology, politics, and economics.

The question of the origins of the Torah goes to the very heart of Orthodox belief and practice and is the subject of Part II, “Appreciating Principles of Faith and the Principle of Torah from Heaven.” The question of what a Jew must believe about the origins of the Torah is inextricably bound with the question of the status and acceptance of the Thirteen Principles of Faith. As with all matters of rabbinic tradition, these subjects have a long history. And as with all matters of rabbinic tradition, what recent authorities have ruled and taught carries the greatest weight for contemporary thought and practice. To appreciate the distinctive qualities and authority of the Thirteen Principles in general and how the sages of Israel have related to the question of the Torah’s origins in particular, we must trace these issues from the beginning. Chapter 8, “From the Mishna to the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of Faith,” explores how our earliest authorities related to the origins of the Torah and the question of principles of faith, from the Mishna until the composition of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles. Here we probe several crucial questions: When and where did the notion of “fundamental

principles” of Judaism arise? Just what did it mean that a proposition was “a fundamental principle”? What are the various opinions within talmudic sources concerning the origins of the Torah? Were these various opinions considered by their expositors to be “fundamental principles” of the Jewish faith? If not, why not? The Rambam was not the first major rabbinic figure to compose a list of principles of faith. How did his principles differ from those proposed by his predecessors, and why?

Beliefs matter and they matter halakhically. *Posekim* since the *Shulhan Arukh* have unanimously adopted the halakhic definition of heretic as that defined in the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, in the third chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, halakhot 6–8. They do so without referencing the Rambam’s formulation of the Principles of Faith in his introduction to the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin, in his Commentary on the Mishna. In chapter 9, “The Rambam’s Principle of Torah from Heaven: From His Introduction to *Perek Helek* to the *Mishneh Torah*,” I probe the question: How does the Rambam’s delineation of the principle of “Torah from heaven” in the *Mishneh Torah* differ from his treatment of this issue in the eighth of his Thirteen Principles in the Introduction to *Perek Helek*?

Today we take it as axiomatic that the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles are *the* fundamental principles of the faith. But that status was a long time in coming. In chapter 10, “The Thirteen Principles from The Rambam until the Dawn of Emancipation,” I trace how this acceptance grew from the time of the Rambam in the twelfth century until the dawn of Emancipation at the end of the eighteenth century. But just what did “acceptance” of the principles mean at that time? And what version of the principles was it that gained acceptance?

The beginning of the Emancipation movement at the end of the eighteenth century engendered far-reaching consequences for the socio-religious condition of Jews across Europe. For the first time, the prospect of legal and social equality caused large numbers of Jews to abandon the beliefs and practices of the tradition. Rabbinic leaders faced unprecedented challenges in meeting these new realities. Within this new and threatening situation, the role and prominence of the Thirteen Principles took on new dimensions. Contemporary Orthodoxy has accepted both a commitment to the halakha and to the Thirteen Principles as binding. But they have been accepted in different ways, and the acceptance of

each is governed by different rules. Understanding that difference is the subject of chapter 11, “The Thirteen Principles as Boundary Marker: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.”

The search for spiritual and intellectual integrity inevitably brings one to junctures where there are questions but no apparent answers. In the afterword to this volume, “When We Are Left with Questions,” I probe how our sages responded to potentially damning evidence concerning the Torah and its transmission, and adopt their approach as a guiding light for our own encounter with similar questions.

What blessing should a person say upon the publication of a book of Torah insights? Rabbi Jacob Emden (Altona, Hamburg, 1697–1776) was of the opinion that one should recite the blessing of *Sheheḥeyanu*.⁴ Our sources, he reasoned, speak of reciting this blessing on the acquisition of new items that are of a material nature, such as articles of clothing. Certainly, then, one should recite the blessing when a person publishes a book of insights about the Torah, which is of infinitely greater worth. Moreover, he wrote, such a book would bring pleasure and merit not only to its author, but to all those who learn from it as well. If that is the case, then surely I should recite *Sheheḥeyanu* on the publication of this book, which I pray will bring reaffirmation of our tradition for readers long tormented by challenging questions.

But not all of our authorities agreed with this ruling, among them the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam (1905–1994). He ruled that far from reciting *Sheheḥeyanu*, one who publishes a book of Torah insights should actually recite the blessing *Dayan HaEmet* – the blessing we recite upon news of a death!⁵ He reasoned that in an entire volume devoted to Torah elucidation it was inevitable that an author would err at some point, leading, Heaven forbid, to the misguidance of all who read it. And if that is the case, then surely I should recite *Dayan HaEmet*, as this book touches upon a range of complex and unexplored issues and the nuances and implications of nothing less than the principles of our faith.

4. *Mor UKetzia* (Altona, Hamburg: Beit HaMeḥaber, 1760/1), sec. 223.

5. *Shut Divrei Yatziv* (Union City, NJ: Hitahdut HaTalmidim, 1980), *Orah Ḥayim* 92.

Ani Maamin

And so in joy for the opportunity to share my reflections with others, and in the trembling hope that I have done so in a responsible manner, I conclude with a dual blessing: *Barukh sheheheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh, uvarukh Dayan HaEmet.*

xxx

Part I

*The Tanakh in
Historical Context*



Chapter 1

The Rabbinic Mandate to Understand the Torah in Ancient Near Eastern Context

To fully understand the Torah and its way of conveying ideas and messages, we must seek to understand the Torah in its ancient Near Eastern context. As we will see in the coming chapters, many of the challenges raised by critics concerning the Torah's historical accuracy and the coherence of the text emerge precisely because scholars have for too long ignored the ways and the degree to which the Torah is a literary creation of the ancient world. The questions often raised are founded on anachronistic assumptions – that ancient readers and writers must have written and thought in the same ways as we do today.

But is it religiously legitimate to say that the Torah reflects the way ancients thought and wrote? Is not the Torah eternally valid and above time? Do we not slight the Torah when we propose that it expresses itself in a manner that is culture-dependent or more relevant for one

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generation than another? These questions are crucial not only when we consider Orthodoxy's engagement with biblical criticism. They are critical whenever we wish to study the Torah on its literal – or *peshat* – level. And therefore, this book must begin by exploring these issues at the outset.

One can marshal a wide spectrum of opinions on this topic, indeed, as with so many issues in rabbinic thought. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate both (1) that some of our greatest sages maintained that the Torah not only can be read, but *must* be read, in precisely this way, and (2) that reading the Torah in its ancient context is a sacred enterprise and does not denigrate the sanctity or “eternal” nature of the *kitvei hakodesh* – our sacred Scripture.

THE RAMBAM'S DOCTRINE OF GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIVINE PLAN

The Rambam (or Maimonides, 1135–1204) offers us a particularly rich and detailed meditation on the importance of reading the Torah in its ancient context. To probe his thinking, I would like to examine his well-known – but often misunderstood – explanation of animal sacrifice in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. As many know, the Rambam saw the institution of animal sacrifice in the Torah as concessive in nature. Israel knew no form of worship other than the worship of idols she had seen in Egypt. The Almighty chose, therefore, to establish norms of worship in a form the nation could recognize.¹ Over two lengthy chapters of the *Guide* (3:32 and 3:46), the Rambam identifies the specific heathen practices relating to the god Ares, Hindu practice, and the cultic norms of an ancient culture he knew as Sabean. He sees the minutiae of the *avoda* – sacrificial service – recorded in the Torah as a vehicle to reform those norms. He explains specific mitzvot, such as the prohibition against using honey or leavened bread in the sacrificial worship of the Temple, in light of these ancient practices.

The Rambam stresses that the mitzvot he explains through ancient context do not constitute an exhaustive list. He bemoans

1. Although this opinion is popularly associated with the Rambam, it actually is found earlier, in the Midrash (Leviticus Rabba 22:8).

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the fact that he is removed in place and time from the ancient world and cannot fully appreciate the reforms inherent in each aspect of the *avoda*:

Most of the “statutes” (*hukkim*), the reason of which is unknown to us, serve as a fence against idolatry. That I cannot explain some details of the above laws or show their use is owing to the fact that what we hear from others is not so dear as that which we see with our own eyes. Thus my knowledge of the Sabean doctrines, which I derived from books, is not as complete as the knowledge of those who have witnessed the public practice of those idolatrous customs, especially as they have been out of practice and entirely extinct since two thousand years. If we knew all the particulars of the Sabean worship, and were informed of all the details of those doctrines, we would clearly see the reason and wisdom of every detail in the sacrificial service, in the laws concerning things that are unclean, and in other laws, the object of which I am unable to state.²

In his Letter on Astrology, the Rambam writes of his efforts to learn about the ancient world:

I also have read in all matters concerning all of idolatry, so that it seems to me that there does not remain in the world a composition on this subject, having been translated into Arabic from other languages, but that I have read it and have understood its subject matter and have plumbed the depth of its thought. From those books it became clear to me what the reason is for all the commandments that everyone comes to think of as having no reason at all, other than the decree of Scripture.³

2. *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:49. All translations of the *Guide for the Perplexed* in this volume are taken from the M. Friedländer translation (1903), available online on several sites.
3. Text found in Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 465–66.

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These passages demonstrate that the Rambam holds that many matters in the Torah can be understood only by gaining access to the cultures of the ancient world. Probing the Rambam further, however, we learn that familiarity with the ancient world is not only crucial for understanding the mitzvot. Such study for the Rambam has theological significance: it allows us to discern God's caring and fostering nature. But why and how does the study of Torah in ancient context help us understand God's caring and fostering nature?

To grasp this point, we need to appreciate where his discussion of sacrifice appears in the *Guide*, beginning in section III, chapter 32. As is well known, the Rambam ascribes rationales for the mitzvot in chapters 35–49. Chapter 32 is an introductory chapter to that effort. The chapter explores the divine hand evident in processes of *development*, by which the Rambam means development of all kinds: the physiological development of men and beasts, and the spiritual and psychological development of individuals and of nations. The chapter opens as follows:

On considering the Divine acts or the processes of Nature we get an insight into the prudence and wisdom of God as displayed in the creation of animals, with the gradual development of the movements of their limbs and the relative positions of the latter, and we perceive also His wisdom and plan in the successive and gradual development of the whole condition of each individual.

For the Rambam, when we discern the wonders of physiological development, we more fully apprehend the Almighty's prudence, plan, and wisdom. The point here is not merely an appreciation of the Divine Clockmaker, as it were, a recognition of the wonders of physiology. The Rambam here draws our attention to how physiological mechanisms develop step by step. The Rambam then extends his recognition of the divinely guided processes of development from the realm of animal physiology to the realm of national flourishing:

Many precepts in our Law are the result of a similar course adopted by the same Supreme Being. It is, namely, impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other; it is therefore

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according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed.... By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established.... It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service.

The Rambam's discussion of animal sacrifice, therefore, is much more than an exploration of the rationale of a given mitzva. It is certainly much more than an apologetic for an institution that some might say was a source of embarrassment for the Rambam. Rather, it is an appreciation of the guiding path of slow, spiritual growth afforded Israel by the Almighty, which is part and parcel of His wisdom in guiding the step-by-step growth and development of all creatures in all ways. When we attain a greater understanding of the cultic practices of the ancient world, we can more fully appreciate how the Almighty accommodated Israel's spiritual mindset. The Rambam further notes the divine hand of developmental guidance at work concerning national character. He explains that when the Israelites left Egypt – as the Torah tells us – the Almighty did not want to lead the children of Israel to the Promised Land via the coast, or “via the Philistine route” (Ex. 13:17). He sees this as an expression of the same developmental guidance that the Almighty offers Israel through the medium of animal sacrifice:

It was the result of God's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the wilderness till they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that traveling in the wilderness, and privation of bodily enjoyments, such as bathing, produce courage, whilst the reverse is the source of faint-heartedness.... In the same way the portion of the Law under discussion is the result of divine wisdom, according to which people are allowed to continue the kind of worship to which they have been accustomed, in order that they might acquire the true faith.

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The Rambam strives to understand as much as he can about ancient Near Eastern culture. Doing so enables him to discern the prudence and wisdom of the divine hand and the divine plan. The Rambam maintains that the Torah's cultic prescriptions are a broad *mélange* of continuities *and* discontinuities with ancient Near Eastern practice. A deep recognition of the interplay between the two enables us to apprehend how the Almighty nurtures Israel's spiritual development in incremental steps.⁴ Our own study of the Torah in ancient Near Eastern context can be animated by the same impulse: to discern how the Torah orchestrates the play between continuity and discontinuity with ancient culture.

As is well known, the Rambam had detractors who strenuously disagreed with his accounting of the sacrifices, notably the Ramban (or Nahmanides, 1194–1270) in his comments on Leviticus 1:9. I note, however, the points staked out by the Ramban in his claim, and more significantly, the points he does not make. The Ramban expresses reservations on two accounts. First, he feels that it would simply be ineffective to try to wean Israel off of sacrifice by perpetuating that very institution. Second, he notes that the Torah at a number of points suggests loftier purposes for the sacrifices and nowhere portrays them merely as a stop-gap measure or as concessive in nature. What is noticeably absent from the Ramban's exposition is the claim that it is insulting to the Torah to suggest it speaks with more immediacy to earlier generations than to later ones. In fact, the Ramban also suggests elsewhere that ancient context is necessary for understanding certain passages of the Torah. In his commentary on Exodus 6:25, for example, he questions why the Torah would point out that Elazar the *kohen* married someone from “the daughters of Putiel,” with no indication of who this Putiel was or why he was deserving of distinction. One of the Ramban's suggestions is that Putiel was known to his generation. Moreover, the Ramban approvingly cites the Rambam's accounting of the prohibition of *orla*, which disallows

4. Fascinating in this regard is the well-known talmudic statement (Shabbat 88b–89a) that the Torah was composed 974 generations prior to Creation, which would seem to negate a view that it was written with a given generation in mind. Yet the context of that passage reveals precisely the opposite; the angels question why the Torah was given to Moses and the Almighty essentially responds that the Torah was written specifically for the generation of the Exodus.

deriving benefit from the produce of a tree in its first three years, as a response to ancient Near Eastern practices (commentary on Lev. 19:23). Put differently, the Ramban allows that the Torah may have spoken with more immediacy to its own generation than to later ones. Similarly, the Ramban writes (commentary on Ex. 28:2) that the some of the priestly garments were patterned after royal attire of the time.

RALBAG'S BELIEF THAT THE TORAH COMMUNICATES THROUGH THE LITERARY CONVENTIONS OF ITS AGE

Figures like the Rambam and the Ramban tell us that understanding ancient Near Eastern realities can help us appreciate the specific details of isolated passages of the Torah. But another prominent medieval figure, Ralbag (or Gersonides, 1288–1344), stresses the importance of grasping the Torah within its ancient context, because this context will better help us understand the very way in which the Torah conveys its ideas. For Ralbag, such context contributes to our understanding of the Torah's poetics, the literary devices and conventions that it employs to convey the divine message. The final two weekly *parashot* of the book of Exodus raise a well-known question: The *parashot* of *Teruma* and *Tetzaveh* lay out in great detail the component parts of the Tabernacle that Bezalel is to construct. Why does the Torah repeat all of these details, nearly verbatim, in its narration of the construction of the Tabernacle in *Parashat Vayak'hel* and *Parashat Pekudei*? Ralbag raises this question at the conclusion to his commentary on the book of Exodus and his answer is fascinating on a number of levels:

We ought to attend to a most puzzling issue here in this account, and in many of the Torah's accounts, and that is, that owing to its perfection, the Torah should not contain anything repetitious or extraneous. Yet we see here [in these last two *parashot* of the book of Exodus] repetitiousness without purpose. It would have been sufficient for the Torah to state, "And Bezalel the son of Uri the son of Hur made the Tabernacle, as commanded by the Lord." Moreover, we encounter such repetitiousness at many junctures in the Torah, and to this day, we have not found a compelling explanation for this. Perhaps we may say that it was the

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convention at the time of the giving of the Torah to fashion literature in this way and that the prophet expresses himself through the conventions of the times.⁵

Ralbag displays a remarkable degree of cultural humility. He realizes that aesthetics are not universal. He understands that the mark of literary perfection for one age may not be held in the same regard by another. No less striking is his realization that even the Torah could not express itself in some form of “divine Esperanto,” whereby the divine word would communicate with equal clarity to all human listeners. Ralbag recognizes that it is the limitation of man that precludes this. He does not expect that the Torah would communicate according to the conventions of fourteenth-century Provence, nor should we expect the Torah to communicate according to the canons of modern Western literature, whose roots are in the thought of Aristotle. Ralbag expects the Torah to communicate according to the conventions of the ancient Near East. What is most remarkable about Ralbag’s remarks is that without any exposure to the compositions of the ancient Near East, his conjecture is precisely on the mark. One of the hallmarks of composition – of many types of genres – in the ancient Near East is a predilection for what appears to contemporary tastes as unaesthetic repetition.⁶ No doubt, Ralbag would have rejoiced to know this as a fact.

Even as the Rambam and Ralbag engage ancient Near Eastern texts to help us understand the Torah, for many, there is a certain hesitation to do so that stems from the realm of religious psychology. When you sit to learn, there is a certain aura of *Kedusha* that you feel as you open a textured, cranberry-colored *sefer* from left to right. Somehow, Pritchard’s *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* just doesn’t do it. There is almost a feeling that such materials, even if not forbidden, are surely from the world of *hullin*, the wider, general world, and somehow encroach upon the holiness of the endeavor of Talmud Torah. In our world, where an atmosphere of holiness – *Kedusha* – is such a fragile thing, the feeling is

5. The translation is my own.

6. Jerrold S. Cooper, “Symmetry and Repetition in Akkadian Narrative,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97 (1977): 508–12.

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understandable. However, figures like the Rambam, Ralbag, and Abarbanel (1437–1508) freely and seamlessly integrated non-Torah materials into their study of the Torah. Their model of how to integrate these materials into a proper understanding of Torah should offer us the religious security blanket to do the same. Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865–1935) also wrote that we should expect the Torah to incorporate preexisting laws from the ancient Near East, when these laws possess a moral foundation. He writes:

Many things that are found in the Torah, be they commandments or narrative accounts, are surely also to be found in similar form in the writings of earlier great and righteous figures of the gentile world. The great divine light that extends to the prophecy of our master Moses clarified and purified these elements, separating out those traces of impurity and error. All that has merit from these practices and accounts are gathered by the divine desire and retained to be performed and recounted. Israel has no need to take the credit of having created the first moral laws of the world, nor even for having introduced monotheism to the world The discovery in our time of the epigraphic archives of the civilizations of the ancient Near East and the parallels found between them and various aspects of the Torah should add light and rejoicing to all who truly seek out God.⁷

THE TORAH: CULTURE-DEPENDENT AND ETERNAL?

We have seen, then, at least two prominent sages who underscore the importance of grasping the Torah's ancient Near Eastern context. But if

7. See Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *LiNevukhei HaDor* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), 167 and 174. See also Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *Eder HaYakar VeIkvei HaTzon* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985), 42. See further the essay by Rabbi Chaim Navon on this subject, "Torah and Ancient Near-Eastern Law," <http://etzion.org.il/en/torah-and-ancient-near-eastern-law>. We can also add Ibn Ezra and Ibn Caspi to the list of those who utilized ancient Near Eastern customs to explain biblical passages; see Basil Herring, *Joseph Ibn Kaspi's Gevia' Kesef: A Study in Jewish Medieval Philosophic Bible Commentary* (New York: Ktav, 1982), 61–63 for specific instances.

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there are aspects of the Torah that are indeed best understood in ancient context, in what sense is the Torah “eternal”?

The supposition of the Torah’s “eternity,” while correct, needs to be defined. Do we mean that its meaning is fixed, singular, and eternal? Such a position contravenes fundamental tenets of rabbinic Judaism. If this is the sense in which the Torah is eternal, then there is no room for Hillel HaZaken to introduce the seven principles through which he interpreted the Torah, nor is there room for R. Yishmael to introduce his thirteen additional principles of interpretation. Indeed, there would have been no room for any interpretation at all. All ages would need to understand the Torah in exactly the same manner. The “eternal” nature of the Written Torah, its multifaceted richness, is found only through the medium of the interpretative process of the *Torah Shebe’al Peh*. The Sages teach that there are seventy “faces” to the Torah. The simplest meaning, the *peshat*, is sometimes time-dependent, addressed to the generation that received the Torah. But its other meanings radiate throughout the millennia, allowing new perspectives and interpretations to thrive.

With this perspective, we can now address some of the most vexing questions posed by the field of academic biblical studies. In the remaining chapters of this section, we will see that the question of the historical accuracy of the Tanakh and the question of inconsistency and contradiction in the Torah take on a new light when these questions are examined in ancient Near Eastern context.