Pentateuchal Criticism (Medieval Judaism)

The past few years have witnessed a surge in academic interest in the ways in which medieval scholars dealt with the problems of High Criticism. We should start our discussion with two methodological remarks. First, it is important to note the differences between the basic assumptions of the classical commentaries and those of modern biblical scholars: The medieval exegetes assume, as a given, that God gave Moses the Torah at Mount Sinai, and that it was written by divine inspiration. Therefore, any discussion of questions relating to criticism was based on the assumption that the texts were written by prophets or Sages who acted with divine authority. By contrast, modern scholars lack the assumption that the source of the Bible is divine. Second, one should differentiate between exegetical notes that discuss the issue of human redaction of the Torah and those that deal with verses that were added to the Torah at a later date, after Moses’ time (interpolation).

According to some biblical commentators, the biblical text was edited by a human redactor before it reached its final form. The redactor (author, writer, composer) related to the text as to a divine document but did not refrain from resequencing and organizing the material, according to literary considerations and other editing principles. According to these commentators, the redactors operated within the domain of poetic analysis, which includes the sequencing of the verses, aesthetic or rhetorical aspects of the text’s composition, and other literary issues.

First among the medieval Sages who dealt with questions regarding the Torah’s redaction were the Karaite exegetes, whose writings include the term *Mudawwin* (=editor) as relating to the human redaction of the divine text. The first who mentions this term is Ya'qub al- Qirqisānī, who assumed that Moses edited the Torah and incorporated parenthetical comments and sentences within the holy text. Yefet ben ‘Eli broadly developed this approach in his commentary on the Bible and claimed that the *Mudawwin* wrote the holy texts in his own words (Ben Shammai; Poliak 2005). There are those who claim that according to Yefet, it was not Moses who edited the Torah but a later editor (Zawanowska, 27—57, 140—153). Many Karaite commentators followed in their footsteps and applied this notion to all the biblical books. The massive Karaite interest in the questions of biblical authorship may have arisen from the need to cope with the Islamic erudition that undermined the validity of the Oral Torah (Poliak 2015, 395—401).

The evolution of the ‘strife’ is probably the *‘Sadran’* mentioned by the Byzantine commentators, including Re’uel, Tuvia ben Eliezer (*Lekah Tov*), and Menahem ben Shelomo (*Sekhel Tov*). Comments scattered among their writings attest to the fact that they believed that a human editor (Moses, Ezra, or some anonymous editor) redacted the biblical text, abridged it, expanded it, added details, and updated it (Steiner, 124—128; Elboim, 82—95; Geula). The notion of human redaction of the Torah reached the *peshat* (=plain reading of the text) school in Northern France (Harris). There are those who suggest that according to the Rashbam, Moses wrote most of the narrative parts of the Torah, as opposed to the legal stratum that was formulated by God (Touitou, 112—125). Joseph Bekhor Shor posited that the *parashot*, verses, and fractions of verses were displaced chronologically due to editing considerations (Jacobs 2017, 230—244). Hezekiah bar Manoah (Hizkuni) also assumed that Moses acted with autonomy when formulating God’s words (see his commentaries on Ex 3:10; 34:32). This approach also infiltrated the Andalusian commentaries: Some claim that according to Abraham ibn Ezra, the entire Torah, aside from a few legal dicta, was formulated by Moses himself (Viezel 2012). We should note that there are scholars who downplay the extent of this phenomenon and claim that it is very restricted (Viezel 2016).

The question of verses that entered the Torah after Moses’ time is a completely different issue. First, we should mention the final eight verses in the Torah. The Babylonian Talmud already addresses this issue (*Bava Batra* 15a) and records an opinion that these verses were written by Joshua after Moses’ death. In the 11th-13th centuries, this opinion echoed among the exegetes (for example, Rashi and his students; Joseph ibn Migash, Meyuhas ben Eliyahu, and others). However, after writing the eighth principle of Maimonides’ Principles of Faith, we no longer find exegetes who espouse this approach (Viezel 2023). Beyond these eight verses, the Sages of Northern France and Ashkenaz pointed out additional later verses. According to Rashbam, these include, for example, Gen 35:20, Ex 16:35, and Num 22:1 (Jacobs 2023, 476—480). Judah the Hasid (or his son Zaltman) mentioned Gen 48:20, Lev 2:13, and Deut 2:8 (Brin 223—226, Viezel 2015). Some of his students followed him, such as Eliezer of Worms, Avigdor Katz, and Menahem Zioni (Weitman 2014). From among the Andalusian exegetes Abraham ibn Ezra stands out once again, when hinting in his commentaries about a series of later verses (Gen 12:6, 13:7, 22:14; Deut 1:1—5, 3:11, 31:9, 34:1—12). Regarding the later verses, it seems that there is a difference between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi exegesis: Exegetes who lived under Muslim influence were more careful about identifying with theories regarding later additions, given the claims, within the Muslim world, that the Torah is a fake. Therefore, Ibn Ezra only hinted at these cases and referred to them as ‘secrets’. As opposed to this, claims that the Torah is fake within the Christian world were uncommon, so there was no need to hide them as ‘secrets’ (Soloveitchik, 242—246).

During the 13th century, Maimonides’ eighth principle was published and circulated. This principle stated that the entire Torah was dictated by God, to Moses, with no human intervention of any kind. Consequently, given Maimonides’ decisive authority, the medieval Sages ceased suggesting commentaries that presupposed human redaction or the addition of verses after Moses’ time.