**Statement of Research and Teaching Plans   | Ariel Seri-Levi**

My research integrates three fields of study that have been fundamental to biblical scholarship since its inception: the composition of the Pentateuch, biblical semantics, and conceptions of God in the Bible. I aim to provide a comprehensive and grounded portrait of the ways in which various biblical texts, especially those found in the Pentateuch, depict the relationship between God and man, and to assess how those compositions employ metaphors drawn primarily from interpersonal relationships to do so.

Today there are two primary approaches to the study of the Pentateuch. The first, employed most often by European scholars, portrays the composition of the Pentateuch as the crystallization of several traditions that were in turn combined and underwent a series of redactions and interpretations. Scholars employing this approach tend to date a significant portion of the Pentateuch to the Persian period. In contrast, Israeli and American scholars maintain various versions of the Documentary Hypothesis and generally argue that most of the Pentateuchal material is a product of the Monarchic period.

One of the important methodological distinctions between the two approaches stems from the relationship between philology, on the one hand, and theology and ideology, on the other. In the first approach listed above, an analysis of conceptions of God, ritual, and history is considered a legitimate tool for discerning between layers of the text and even dating them. While I also analyze the worldviews reflected in the texts, the methodological order of my research is reversed: the first stage is philological analysis, followed by the differentiation of textual layers and a hypothesis regarding their textual integration, and finally a dating of their composition. Only after this analysis has been completed can we address the theological and ideological conceptions of any given historical layer.

For example, in my article “Independent Sources Versus Redactional Strata in the Book of Numbers: Reexamining the Composition of Numbers 25” (based on a chapter in my doctoral dissertation and currently under review by the *Journal of Biblical Literature*), I revisited Numbers 25, the locus of a fundamental methodological debate in the study of the Pentateuch, and demonstrated that it is comprised of three different and independent layers, each of which bears direct and indirect affinities to other compositions in the Pentateuch and outside of it – but not to other layers of chapter 25. Analysis of the Phinehas narrative, which appears in this chapter, requires that this story be contextualized within the Priestly composition and not within the canonical narrative of Numbers 25. The magical act of Phinehas, who stops the divinely ordained plague, should not be read in light of the acts of Moses – which are derived from other sources that, I would argue, were not available to the author of the Phinehas narrative – but rather should be seen in relation to the behavior of Aaron (Numbers 17:9–15), who also took immediate action with magical effect, allaying the divine anger and preventing the total destruction of the people.

In another article, “Two Theologies of Humanity: The Creation of Man and Woman in P and J” (currently under review by *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*), I analyzed the two contrasting conceptions of the nature of humanity as found in the creation narratives, focusing on their portrayals of the relationships between God and humanity and between women and men. In contrast to the canonical-literary readings, on the one hand, and redaction critical approaches, on the other, I proposed a reading of the sequential P and J narratives from the creation of humanity to the dispersal of the nations and the multiplication of languages. In the P source, the similitude between man and God is the primary goal of the creation of man; further, in order that man should rule over the world with the power of God, he is given the blessing of “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Contrary to this, in the J narrative, man – whose original purpose was to tend the earth – becomes like God not in keeping with the divine plan but rather through violation of the divine command, and the increase of humanity comes only as a secondary consequence of the acquisition of knowledge of good and evil. Likewise, the dispersal of humankind across the world, according to the J narrative, is a result not of God’s original desire but rather his efforts to prevent man from becoming like him.

Biblical semantics is a venerable and fundamental field in biblical scholarship and it has seen a resurgence of late, one that recognizes certain cultural and religious assumptions within scholarship itself. My research focuses on terms in biblical Hebrew that are typically seen as bearing theological, philosophical, or psychological meaning, usually under the influence of Jewish and Christian thought; doing away with prior assumptions, I investigate their meaning within their biblical context. The methodological innovation in such an approach is that linguistic analysis is not carried out through an *a priori* categorization of interactions as either interpersonal or human-divine; rather, the primary distinctions must be morphological, that is, based on textual evidence and not on prior assumptions that there must be a gulf between the divine and human realms. Such morphological distinctions engender important conceptual insights regarding conceptions of God as well as conceptions of the self and the emotions in the Bible. In my article, “Is *ḥārâ* an Emotion? Reconsidering Anger in the Hebrew Bible” (currently under review by *Vetus Testamentum*), I reconsider the verb *ḥārâ*, understood by scholars as signifying the emotion of anger. By discerning between two different phrases, *ḥārâ* *le-* and *ḥārâ* *ap̱*, I identify semantic, contextual, and metaphorical distinctions between them that do not allow them to be viewed as two different forms of the same expression. I go on to focus on *ḥārâ* *ap̱* and show, through philological analysis, that this phrase does not signify an internal, subjective event but rather an intersubjective exercising of power within a hierarchical system of relationships.

Combining study of the Pentateuch with biblical semantics in this way allows for a fundamental reinvestigation of the various conceptions of God in the Bible in general and the Pentateuch in particular. The precise differentiation of sources and the tracing of their continuous narrative lines, when integrated with broader synchronic and diachronic analyses of the meanings and uses of various terms, illuminates the philosophical and theological conceptions reflected in the texts. For example, in my article, “*sělîḥâ* in the Priestly Literature” (based on my Master’s thesis, and was published at *Tarbiz*), I differentiated between two conceptions of divine *sělîḥâ* – usually translated “forgiveness” – in the Bible. The more widespread conception sees *sělîḥâ* as a volitional act on God’s part brought about by human supplication. In contrast, in Priestly literature *sělîḥâ* is a mechanical act of removing the sin from the sinner, which comes about automatically through the offering of a sacrifice. This conception is in keeping with the most basic meaning of the root *s-l-ḥ*, which is clarified through a comparison to the Akkadian cognate likening the removal of sin to the washing away of dirt with water.

My doctoral dissertation, in which I engaged in these questions and approaches, resulted in the conclusion that “divine anger” is not a genuine biblical phenomenon but a later hermeneutical-theological term that conflates, unjustifiably, a variety of phenomena belonging to human-divine relations. This conclusion arose from two parts of my dissertation. The first is dedicated to a reconsideration of terms understood by scholars to be the primary expressions of anger, a reconsideration that led to a series of new interpretations of such terms. The second is an investigation of several complex Pentateuchal texts and their various conceptions of God’s destructive anger and human attempts to prevent or assuage it. I intend to adapt my dissertation for release as a book in the coming months (two chapters have already appeared as articles, while the rest are under review); within the same time frame I intend to begin word on a second book.

This book, with the working title *Four Biographies of Yhwh in Relationship with Israel*, will further develop the insights gained from my prior work, taking them in new directions. Once it became clear that each of the Pentateuchal sources portrays “divine anger” in a unique way, each in accordance with its conception of the relationship between God and Israel, I decided to pursue a broader investigation of the diachronic development of this relationship within the plot sequence of each source. The book poses a new question regarding conceptions of God in the Bible. Previous studies that have treated biblical anthropomorphism have analyzed the various ways in which the biblical God appears in space: taking a human form or appearing within such natural phenomena as fire and smoke; being represented by angels or other beings; appearing in the Temple or the heavens, and so on. Others, fewer in number, analyzed the divine personality: God’s love and jealousy; divine mercy and compassion versus anger and violence; tremendous might combined with the need for recognition. The innovation in my research is the integration of these two topics, appearance and personality. I aim to clarify the relationship between the embodiment of God and His personality, a clarification that can be made not through the narrow analysis of one story or plot line but only through viewing the reconstructed narratives of every source.

The first article to result from this project, “Intimacy and Danger: The Presence of God Among the Children of Israel in the J Narrative,” is an expansion upon a section of my dissertation and is currently being revised in preparation for submission to *Harvard Theological Review*. In the article I analyze the connection between the concrete forms of divine embodiment and the personal relationship between God and Israel, showing that the J narrative contains an intensive, explicit, and nuanced treatment of the very same matter. An analysis of the background to Israel’s question “Is Yhwh among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7) allows for an understanding of the purpose of the divine revelation at Sinai according to the J source – a central topic that has yet to be clarified by biblical scholarship. Following the expression of Israel’s doubts, Yhwh decides to strengthen his presence among the people, at the same time warning them time and again that this presence carries the danger of uncontrollable outbreaks on his part, a danger that ultimately materializes: the divine responses to Israel’s lack of faith grow more severe in the narratives of Taberah and Kibroth-hattaavah until, in the J narrative of the spies’ report, Yhwh seeks to destroy the people. This conception of the danger inherent in the proximity of God reveals a surprising similarity between the J and P sources, which have been considered markedly different in nature and outlook, while at the same time revealing a gulf between the J and E sources, which for years have been seen as much less distinct from each other than from P.

In my academic teaching I also engage in these three fields: study of the Pentateuch, biblical semantics, and conceptions of God. I bring a rich body of experience in teaching: in recent years I have served as a lecturer in Bible at David Yellin College of Education, and I am currently teaching also at the Bible department of the Hebrew University and the Kerem Institute. As a graduate of the Revivim Honors Teacher-Training Program in Jewish Studies, I have taught Bible and Jewish Thought at the Charles E. Smith Jerusalem High School for the Arts and have written textbooks and teachers’ guides at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Two of my students from various institutions, who have kept in touch with me after completing their studies, are now entering the Bible Department at the Hebrew University: a student of mine from the Jerusalem High School for the Arts is beginning his BA in the department as part of the Revivim program, and another from David Yellin College is beginning her MA with plans to write her master’s thesis in the field of Pentateuchal studies.

At David Yellin College I taught survey courses on biblical texts, primarily the Pentateuch but also Jeremiah and Psalms, instructing students in the philological-historical methodology and helping them cultivate a sensitivity to various features of the text and discern between multiple layers in its development. I also taught electives on various specialized subjects, including the image of sin, in which the students became familiar with using precise semantic distinctions between biblical terms as a basis for asking ethical, political, and theological questions about the nature of sin in various biblical texts. In a seminar course titled “Will God really dwell on earth? Temples and the presence of God in the Bible,” students wrote research papers on such topics as “The role of fire in myth and ritual in Priestly literature,” “The meaning of the phrase *kᵉḇôḏ Yhwh*,” and “The dangers of seeing the face of God.” Such subjects will also be discussed in the course “Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy,” which I plan to teach this year in the Bible Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I have also taught in the David Yellin College the course “Introduction to Bible” for several years in a row. It is especially important to me to show that the critical method of biblical study demands systematic and precise work requiring training and effort; indeed, this is the key to deep engagement with the broader philosophical, historical, and theological concepts reflected in biblical literature.