The Torah Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts

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I have to admit that I have never been particularly bothered by the tension between the academic position proclaiming the Tanakh’s gradual formation and the belief that Torah is from Heaven. When I am asked about this, I recall one of the scenes from *Breaking Bad*, a television series about Walter White, a chemistry teacher, who makes a career change after being diagnosed with cancer, morphing into a cruel drug dealer in an attempt to provide for his family after he is gone.

In this scene, White, who has just disposed of the corpse belonging to the first of his many victims in the series, sits in his car and ponders his college days when he was a brilliant student, a prodigy with a glowing future. The camera pans to a classroom looking out upon a misty vista. In the classroom, White and his then lover contemplate the chemicals that make up the human body. He writes on the board: 63% hydrogen, 26% oxygen, 9% carbon… the two continue calculating the lesser elements as well as the trace elements iron, phosphorous…and reach the sum total of 99.888042% of the human body’s chemical components. There is still a tiny fraction missing, 0.111958% to be exact, that they cannot manage to identify. Finally, his girlfriend asks, [What about the soul](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-Qva8lG4mY&t=4s)?

Indeed, human beings are not the sum total of their quantifiable elements. There is always the immeasurable soul. The world, as well, is not the sum total of its components, and likewise the Tanakh is not merely the sum total of its parts. The Tanakh’s secret charm is the fact it is never fully revealed to us; it never fully conveys its essence even to those dedicated to its decoding. No study has ever succeeded in encapsulating its essence, refracted by its plurality of perspectives, and it is hard to believe any study ever will.

Even people who have read the entire Torah annually for several decades discover new hidden treasures which they had not noticed before. Likewise, even someone who has taught Tanakh repeatedly will be surprised by it every time she reads it with an open heart. This dimension, the soul of the Tanakh, is what prevents it from becoming the fruits of one research study or of one investigation or another.

The burning desire to reveal the truth is shared by believers and academicians. And if we examine faith and academic study carefully we will find that faith is not so different from academic study. The two are not dissimilar, closed systems. Both contain multiplicity and an enormous amount of variation to the point where we cannot distinguish between science and faith. Just as there are various, scholarly approaches to understanding biblical literature, the Tanakh’s history, development, and processes of canonization, so too there is no one unified understanding of Tanakh.

For many people, the Tanakh is a document that attests to our [ed. the Jewish people’s] right to the Land of Israel, for others it is a philosophical text, like many others. Some employ it to whitewash racism, sexism, and nationalism, while others employ it as a document championing social justice and the love of humanity and the world. The Bible student’s concepts and beliefs effect both the basic assumptions of the academicians who are committed to objective research and the fruits of their research. Furthermore, they impact on how these scholars understand the Sinaitic revelation. These scholars’ temperaments and styles will also influence their approaches both to academic research and to the issue of the text’s sanctity.

In my opinion, the web of enchantment that biblical literature casts over its students and readers comes from that tiny, but crucial, particle that no theory or doctrine of belief can explain. This is the very core of the Tanakh, and this is the reason that the Tanakh will never get old or lose its shine.

The desire for absolute truth is understandable, and it is common to both believers in Torah from Sinai and to those who applaud academic research, which is as sharp as a knife and lacks the distinctions of biblical literature. Both, however, are oblivious to the fact that there is no work like the Tanakh as a literary, spiritual, and religious agent shaping humanity (at least in the West). This fact cannot be whitewashed whether those doing so sit in the study hall or dwell within the precincts of the academy.