**On the Merits of Confusion and the Demerits of Collusion**

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Berl Katznelson was one of the leaders of the Zionist Labor Movement during the first half of the twentieth century. In one of his famous speeches, he proclaimed: “We must not labor in deception, neither actually nor in thought; let our lot not lie with the white-washers.” This speech, which was entitled “On the Merits of Confusion and the Demerits of White-Washing” [*Bi-Zekhut ha-Mevukhah u-be-Genut ha-Tiah*], spoke to the political situation in 1940; however, Katznelson’s words also reflect my world view on how to resolve the conflict between the academy’s understanding of the Tanakh, in general, and of the Torah, in particular, and traditional belief in ‘Torah from Sinai.’

For many years, religious society opted, almost entirely, out of exploring the *peshat* [literal] interpretation of the Bible. This decision arose from, among many reasons, the fear that if the study of Tanakh was not filtered through the interpretations of Our Sages, of blessed memory, this could give rise to critical questions that might be heretical. This approach even held sway at Bar-Ilan University in its early years. Thus, the founders of the university decided that Bible study would not be treated as an area of critical enquiry in order to spare their students from grappling with questions of faith.

The quest for traditional sources that address human participation in the formulation of the Torah reveals that there are quite a few, dating from the period of Our Sages, of blessed memory, the medieval period, and the time of the later authorities. Thus, for instance, one of the more infamous passages in this regard is found in Abraham ibn Ezra’s commentary on Deut 1:2: “If you understand the secret of the twelve—as well as ‘and Moses wrote’ (Deut. 31:9), ‘and the Canaanites were then in the land’ (Gen. 12:6), ‘on the mountain God will appear’ (Gen. 22:14), ‘here is his bestead, an iron bedstead’ (Deut. 3:11)[4] – you will recognize the truth.”[[1]](#footnote-1) However, all these sources still presume that even if human beings wrote parts of the Bible, these sections were still written in sanctity, whether by Moses or by later prophets. The regnant critical position, however, claims that these are later additions made during the interlude between the First Temple and the Hellenistic periods.

Given this state of affairs, we cannot deny that, for believers, grappling with the assumption that the Pentateuch is a historiographical artifact composed by human beings is a very complex task. How can we weep at the grave of Rachel, our foremother, and simultaneously speak of Jacob as a mythical figure representing the forebearer of the Northern Kingdom of Israel? How can we read the Haggadah with proper intent on Seder night when we know that there is no extra-biblical proof for the Exodus from Egypt? And how do we grapple with the understanding that ancient Israel arose from autochthonous groups that dwelt in Canaan during the second millennium before the Common Era? Must we adopt explanations that adhere to the Tanakh’s narrative and disregard the conflicting archeological and extra-biblical data we now possess?

There are those who take this step. However, this is the very white-washing we must avoid. The role of the acolyte of science is to quest for truth; however, “the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is [also] truth” (bShabbat 55a). Or in other words, truth is at the very heart of academic research, but it is, no less so, at the core of Divine worship. We must engage in the scientific search for truth without being afraid of what we may find. This obligation stems just as much from our private identities as believers searching from divine truth as it does from our roles as members of the academy.

Having recognized this reality, we must take an unvarnished look at the difficulties and admit that we don’t have the answers to many of the questions that arise from the critical examination of the Torah. And that, even if this means we cannot accept “Torah from Sinai” literally, and even if this means our faith becomes more complex, the truth requires us to live with this confusion and not throw “our lot in with the white-washers.”

1. Translation by Rabbi Dr. Zev Farber. Project TABS Editors, "Seven Torah Passages of Non-Mosaic Origin According to Ibn Ezra and R. Joseph Bonfils" TheTorah.com (2014).https://thetorah.com/article/seven-torah-passages-of-non-mosaic-origin-according-to-ibn-ezra-and-r-joseph-bonfils [↑](#footnote-ref-1)