

A Jewish Interpretation of Exodus

The following article is an edited version (by the author) of a talk – *A Fresh Look at Exodus: Insights from the Jewish Interpretative Tradition* – given to the Hull and York Circles during 2010. The author is the secretary of the Hull Circle.

Introduction

If we ask the question: What is the Bible? we are really asking what does it *mean* for each generation. This is the question that Jewish commentators have asked over the centuries as they have sought to engage with the text handed down to them. A 3rd century source states that “the Holy Scriptures may not be read, but may be studied” (*Tosefta Shabbat 13.1*). Rabbinic interpretation of the Bible recognises that it may have numerous meanings. A first century rabbi said “turn it over, and turn it over again, for everything is in it” (*Mishnah Avot 5:26*), whilst an 11th century source suggests that the Torah, that is, the first 5 books of the Bible, has 70 faces (*Numbers Rabbah Naso*). And if the prophet Jeremiah can proclaim that God tells us “my word is like fire, and like a hammer that shatters rock” (ch. 23), then the later commentators can tell us that just as a hammer shatters rock into numerous splinters, so may a single biblical verse yield a multiplicity of meanings (*Sanhedrin 34a*).

At the same time there has always been a strong belief that “there is no scripture except according to its literal sense”, so if the book of Exodus says that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, then it happened. This is known in Hebrew as *P’shat*, the literal meaning. But there’s always a question, in this case, why a bush? And there are always answers. That phrase, no scripture except according to its literal sense, although based on an early tradition (*Shabbat 63a, Yevamot 11b, 24a*), comes from Moses ben Maimon, usually called by the Latin version of his name, Maimonides. Born in Spain in 1135, he was and still is one of the foremost Jewish philosophers, scholars and biblical commentators.

Another important authority is Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides, also born in Spain, in 1194. He is also known as the *Ramban* which is an acronym of the first letters of his names. In response to Maimonides’ dictum about literal interpretation, he said that the earlier commentators didn’t say that the Bible *only* has its straightforward meaning, but we have its interpreted or homiletic meaning side by side with the straightforward, and the text departs from neither. It can encompass both, and both are true, and the two stand side by side. This interpreted meaning, is called in Hebrew *D’rash*, meaning searching or examining. Nachmanides also said that the Book of Exodus is really the Book of Redemption. It is much more than simply the escape from Egypt. First the Israelites had to return from exile, *then* they had to be redeemed.

Exodus is often held up as a paradigm of freedom and indeed the annual Jewish celebration of Passover is focussed on this element. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, a South African orthodox rabbi, points out that the Israelites in fact did the opposite of what the world understands by freedom. Their bonds of slavery were broken, true, but immediately they opt to take on the divine commandments. They exchange the deprivation of freedom in Egypt where their *rights* were removed, for the *responsibilities* of the law. And as Tatz notes the law given by God is all about obligations not rights, a word which doesn’t appear in Exodus at all.

The Narrative of Exodus

Chapters 1 to 16 of Exodus, so only two-fifths, deal with the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt and their departure from it. Chapters 17 to 24, a further fifth, tell of the revelation at Sinai, the giving of the law, and the birth of the people of Israel as a nation. Chapters 25 to 40, the final two-fifths, are about the “tent of meeting”, the tabernacle, and it’s construction by the people. That in itself tells us something about the focus of the book, and its key message.

The Burning Bush

Chapter 3 gives us the story of the appearance of God in The Burning Bush. We asked earlier “why a bush?”. One key principal of engaging with the text from a Jewish perspective is that nothing is superfluous. The first five books of the Bible, the *Torah*, are accepted as divinely inspired, so if the Torah says it was a bush then it was a bush and there must be a reason for it. And indeed there have been numerous interpretations, such as:

- It was a thorn bush because thorn is a lowly plant thus signifying humility, and also reminding us that there is no place on earth where God is not present
- It symbolises Man – a fire may burn within his heart but it does not consume the body
- It symbolises God’s mercy upon sinners – it burns but is not destroyed – echoes of purgatory here perhaps?
- It represents Israel, because as a thorn bush can produce both thorns and roses, Israel produces both good and bad people
- It refers to the future when, should Israel find itself in lowly circumstances, they can know that God is in their midst.

These expansions, or parables, are typical of the *D'rash* interpretation.

I am who I am

In verse 14 of Chapter 3 Moses asks God what His name is, and we have the well-known response: “I am who I am”. Again this is a rich source of symbolism and interpretation. Is it a name or a description? Some commentators see it as defining as it were the eternal and absolute God, whereas others see it as the answer to the question: what can you God do for us?

Maimonides did not principally understand this verse as giving a name, but rather as a lesson in the nature of divinity. He believed that we can't define what God is, because we are limited by our language. For example, God cannot be said to exist, because he is outside existence. Words like eternal, omnipotent and so on are somehow inadequate, and he believed that biblical phrases such as the “hand of God” cannot be taken literally – this is one of the few exceptions to our earlier rule that scripture does not depart from its literal sense. Indeed his writings strongly influenced Thomas Aquinas, both in terms of how to interpret scripture and also on the nature of God.

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known as Rashi, who lived in France, about a hundred years before Maimonides, also did not take God's answer as a name and interpreted these three Hebrew words as God saying to Moses: *I am* with them in their present afflictions and *I will be* with them in future afflictions. But note: when Gods says to Moses, say “*I am*” *has sent you*, in effect he is saying: ‘say to the children of Israel that *I am* (*with you in this affliction*) has sent you’.

Also note that in verse 14 the text has “God said” twice, apparently superfluously. The Jerusalem translation has “added” for the second one. Remembering our general principle that everything is there for a reason, everything has a meaning, we can look for an interpretation, and it is that between these two phrases, Moses has asked God a question, not recorded in the text. Bearing Rashi's interpretation in mind, that question is specifically: “why should I tell them about future afflictions when they've got enough now?” To which God replies “tell them I Am (with them in these *current* afflictions) has sent you”. Rashi has taken what appears to be a hint or suggestion of something beyond the literal text, and given an explanation. This type of interpretation is known as *Remez*, meaning a hint. Rashi is particularly good at this and he is still much studied today, and is called “the father of commentators”.

The Ten Plagues

Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague was born in the early 16th century. He noted that the well-known Ten Plagues of Exodus are in effect a reversal of the so-called “ten utterances” by which God created the world in Genesis – therefore God is destroying the Egyptians in a highly symbolic way. Thus for example ‘let there be light’ was shut down by the plague of darkness; the death of the Egyptian livestock in chapter 9 shuts down the creation of wild beasts in Genesis 1 verse 25; the very first verse of Genesis “in the beginning” representing creation at its absolute, was reversed as it were by the death of the first born.

The Plague of Frogs

Chapter 8 records the plague of frogs, although in verse 2 ‘Frog’ is singular. Rabbi Akiva, who was born some 20 years after the death of Jesus, suggested it implies there was only one frog that covered the land of Egypt, but, tongue no doubt firmly in cheek, it was a big one. Rabbi Eleazar, one of Akiva's disciples, more prosaically suggests that the one frog croaked, presumably very loudly, and attracted many others.

In verse 5, Moses asks a strange, almost comical, question: at what time do you want me to stop the frogs? The interpretation is that Pharaoh might be expected to say “relieve my land now”, out of compassion for his people, but that in a double bluff, might also assume that Moses would expect him to say “now”, since Moses may *know* that the plague would cease naturally now. So Pharaoh says “tomorrow” in an attempt to outwit Moses, so he thinks, but for the rabbinic commentators this was just evidence of Pharaoh's cruelty in that he would let his people suffer for another day, just to prove Moses wrong. And Rabbi Bachya who lived like Maimonides and Nachmanides in Spain, in the 14th Century, points out that before the next plagues of beasts, pestilence, hail and locusts, Moses appears to be mocking Pharaoh because in each case he says “tomorrow this will happen”.

The Egyptians Drowned in the Sea

In Chapter 15 the Egyptians are drowned in the sea. Rabbinic Judaism seems to have been a little shocked by the intensity of this event, and in several ways expresses sympathy with their defeated enemies. One story has the angels being rebuked by God, as they were about to start singing his praises: “my people the Egyptians are drowning and you would sing songs?” During the Passover Seder meal, 10 drops of wine are ritually spilt to remember the 10 plagues and those taking part are urged to refrain from licking their fingers as the taste of victory is not sweet. In addition, the psalms sung or spoken at the Seder, numbers 113 to 118 (which are

mentioned in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper – Mark 14:26, Matthew 26:30), are split into two, like the sea, but to reflect the diminished joy of the liberated at the death of the liberators. This is surely a very powerful lesson in compassion.

Verse 2 has the people say: “This is my God”. The rabbis, for whom the meaning of torah does not depart from its literal meaning, understood “this” as indicating something tangible. Rashi says that even the humblest person could literally point a finger at God intervening in history. The *Mechilta*, probably a 3rd century work, and one of the principal commentaries on Exodus, states that “a maid servant saw at the Red Sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel did not”. This is a reference to the visions of God that those two prophets saw, the implication being that *all* the Israelites at the Red Sea too saw a vision of God, but a much clearer, stronger one, at this key moment in their history, this event at the heart of Israel’s self-understanding as the people of God, than those prophets did. Martin Buber, the 20th Century Austrian Jewish philosopher, called it “the holy event”.

The text of The Song at the Sea, in a *Sefer Torah*, or Torah scroll, is written differently from the standard solid block of text. Spaces are left between the words and they are arranged into three columns, so at a glance the text appears almost like a small chess board. This spacing is deliberate, and represents the people in the midst of the sea, water to right and left of them. It also reflects verse 11: “who is like you O God, majestic in holiness, terrible in deeds of prowess, worker of wonders?” In fact the Jerusalem translation is not so good here. The Hebrew for *terrible in deeds of prowess is nora tehillot*, which Rashi translates more accurately as awesome in praise, or better still, too awesome, i.e. beyond praise. So the verse presented the commentators with another paradox. Question: Who is like you God? Answer: No-one, therefore we must praise you. But you are too awesome for praise, you are beyond our mortal words. And then Rashi brings in a separate biblical verse, like Moses earlier quoting Jeremiah, to resolve a problem. Psalm 65 tells us that “For You, silence is praise” (admittedly only one possible translation). We start to praise then we fail – hence the spaces in the text.

The Ten Commandments

By Chapter 20 the Israelites have arrived at Sinai and God gives them the “Ten Commandments” which also appear in slightly different form in Deuteronomy chapter 5. Jewish tradition takes the prologue in verse 2 here as the first of the ten commandments, some seeing it as a commandment to believe in God, although Nachmanides says not – for him belief is too fundamental a thing to be commanded, although he does acknowledge the need to accept the idea of God as God before any other commandment can be performed.

Verse 12 is ‘honour thy father and mother’. Maimonides asks whether a son should honour an evil father, and concludes that yes, he should. An illegitimate son also should honour and fear his father but is exempt from the prohibitions against striking his father until such time as the father repents. Strong stuff, but based on the notion perhaps that we don’t choose our parents, so relying on just admiration would not sustain society for long. Two centuries later however, but still in Spain, Jacob ben Asher in his codification of Jewish law, disagrees with Maimonides and concludes that if the father does not repent, the children are not obligated to honour him. The debate continues over time, all stemming from one biblical verse. The point of it all is to try and fit ancient and divine principles to contemporary difficulties.

Verses 21-23: The famous “eye for an eye” rule – the law here restricts retaliation, it doesn’t require it. As one commentator said (*Bava Kama* 83b) – suppose one eye was large and one small? Suppose a blind man knocked out another’s eye? How could the law be fulfilled other than by monetary compensation? Various other sources confirm this interpretation.

Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle

So we come to Chapter 25 and the lengthy section describing The Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle. As God created the Earth, the physical world, as a dwelling place for Man, so Man created the Tabernacle, in Hebrew the *Mishkan*, as a dwelling place for God. In chapter 30 the ingredients for the incense to be used in the Mishkan are listed, and include a substance called *galbanum*, which was said to have an unpleasant odour by itself. Why therefore include it at all? The rabbinic interpretation was that this represents human nature in a way, so that even if someone sins he or she is still essential to the prayer of the community, and it cannot in fact be perfect without them. It would be deficient worship without the tainted prayer just as the incense would be deficient without the galbanum.

The Golden Calf

Chapter 32 is the story of the golden calf. In verse 7 God says to Moses “go down for the people you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt”. In verse 11 Moses replies, “why vent your wrath on the people that *you* brought out of Egypt...” A commentary called the Verses of Rabbi Kahana, which may be as early as the 5th century, takes this small episode to a much deeper level. The people of Israel belong to God whether they are faithful or not. Moses is simply stating this fact in his response to God. In verse 16 there is an interpretation in

the *Sayings of the Fathers (Pirke Avot, c. 3rd Century)*: do not read *harut* meaning ‘engraved’, but *herut*, meaning ‘freedom’, since no one is more free than when they obey the law of God.

Seeing God’s Glory

In verse 18 of Chapter 33 Moses asks to see God’s glory. The Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism, reverses verse 18 – no-one can see Me and live – and says that when anyone dies they will see God. They will at this point be accompanied by three angels: one counts their good and bad deeds over their life; the second counts the days of their life; and the third has been with them since before birth. This mystical interpretation of scripture is called in Hebrew *sod*, secret, but secret in the sense of not yet found, rather than deliberately hidden. In verse 29 of Chapter 34 we are told that after encountering God, Moses’ face shone with rays of light. Jerome in the 4th century translated the Hebrew word *keren*, a ray, as horns, hence the famous statue of Moses by Michelangelo, in the Church of St Peter in Chains in Rome, whose head appears to have two horns.

The Sabbath Commandments

Chapter 35, Verse 1: Moses gathered the people – *gathered* here is the same verb as 32:1 when the people gathered to worship the golden calf. This new gathering in effect seeks to cancel out the previous one. He speaks to the people about the Sabbath again, and the rabbinic commentators noticed how the Sabbath commandments appear to “blanket” the golden calf episode, as if to reinforce the importance of it – in other words the text itself teaches a lesson, “if you’d paid attention this little interlude wouldn’t have happened”. The sanctifying nature of the Sabbath acts as a sort of religious antiseptic to the wound of the golden calf.

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