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Jewish and Christian Bible Reading

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Jewish and Christian Bible Reading¹

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Seder Eliyahu Zuta, a book of homilies² contains a parable of a king who invites two of his servants, gives each of them a bag filled with seeds of wheat and a pile of flax, and says: I embark on a journey; These I deposit with you. While the king is away, one of the servants cleaned the flax and wove a beautiful table-cloth. He also ground the wheat-seeds and baked a loaf of tasty bread. When the king is back he finds the tasty bread ready for him on the table-cloth... The other servant handed the king the seeds and the flax exactly in the same form they had been deposited... The author of this parable is rather explicit about its message: Rabbinic Judaism is the diligent servant who received the crude material, the written law (=The five books of Moses) from the Supreme King, and processed it by means of **midrash=creative hermeneutics**, into a comprehensive life-guide, a Code of conduct for all aspects of life: the religious, between man and the Omni-present, and the social-moral aspects, between man and other fellowmen.

Who is the other servant, the one who believed that he should not temper with the king's deposit? Was he a dissenting group e.g. the Karaites who denied the authority of the "Oral Torah", of what we call today 'Rabbinic Judaism'? If this parable had been created earlier in history, it could have reflected an anti-Christian polemic. The Jews in the second century were still debating with

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¹ Niniejsza publikacja jest wystąpieniem konferencyjnym.

² Probably edited in the 8th century, approximately when the Karaite Movement began.

their Christian brethren and neighbors, and much of these debates focused on hermeneutics. Such a debate is reflected in the words of Rabbi Elazar haModai: “The one who contempts Sabbath and Festivals, and annuls the covenant of our forefather Abraham (i.e. the covenant of circumcision), and perverts the meaning of the Torah, even though he is knowledgeable of Torah and performs good deeds, shall have no share in the hereafter...” [Mishna, Avot 3,15]. This message is clearly directed against Pauline Christianity with its hermeneutics that undermined the rabbinic emphasis on strict observance of the laws of Sabbath and holidays, the covenant of circumcision³, and the overall authority of the rabbinic exegesis for the Biblical texts.

Were the Jews aware of the New Testament of their Christian neighbors? The following Talmudic anecdote employs names of two famous Jews in the early second century, but it is likely to be composed in the third century: “Imma Shalom, wife of Rabbi Eliezeer, was the sister of Rabban Gamliel. There was a sectarian Jew⁴ in their neighborhood who was known as an honest man (and served as a judge). She sent him a golden lamp as a gift, and told him: ‘I wish to inherit the estate of my deceased father splitting it with my brother’. He summoned both of them and said: The Law of Moses has been superseded by EvanGilion which rules: ‘A son and a daughter inherit equally’”. On the following day Rabban Gamliel sent him a Lybian donkey (=a high quality ass) as a gift... He summoned both again and said: I kept on reading the EvanGilion and it is written there: “I neither came to diminish from the Law of Moses, nor to add to it [Matthew 5:17]. Imma Shalom told the judge: ‘May your wisdom shine as a golden lamp’. Rabban Gamliel told her: An ass came and pushed the lamp aside...” [Talmud, Shabbat 116a-b] The anti-Christian polemic in this anecdote is reflected by its false claim that the Evangelion calls for egalitarian inheritance...

You are all aware that we, Jews, do not use the term “Old Testament” –We have only one testament: It is old and new at all times! The book of Deuteronomy repeatedly refers to God’s commandments, as “the commandments that I (God) command you **today**”. The rabbinic exegesis is that every day one should embrace the Divine Law as if it were a new gift given today. Similarly

³ Epistle to the Romans 14,7-8; 4,17.

⁴ In the printed editions of the Talmud: “a philosopher”.

our tradition expects a husband to love his wife just like he did on their wedding day... We know that these expectations are “easier said than done”, but they do reflect an insight on how human beings change their attitude toward valuable gifts when the years go by...

Early Rabbinic literature calls the Hebrew Bible ‘Mikra’ which literally means “the text which is being read (i.e. which is written scroll, assuming that other texts are transmitted orally)”. Our most common name for the Bible in recent centuries is TaNaKh – acronym for its three main parts: Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim. Although the entire TaNaKh is considered sacred, there is no doubt that in Jewish tradition the first part, Torah, the Pentateuch, is more sacred than the books of the ‘Prophets’ and the ‘Scriptures’. This difference is reflected in the norms of public reading: The Torah is divided into portions which are read one week after the other without skipping even one word, whereas some chapters of the prophets and scriptures are read once a year, but not one chapter after another. Jewish Law employs the books of Moses as proof-text. Rarely is a verse or a phrase from the Prophets or Scriptures employed to give support for a legal innovation.

Jewish Law is formally the product of Midrash =hermeneutics of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The early rabbis were convinced that they were only interpreting what Moses received in Sinai. Rarely they admit that rabbinic traditions are “Mountains hanging on a hair” =”piles” of laws and norms having only a tiny scriptural basis in the Torah. This freedom of creative hermeneutics works in two opposite directions: to expand or to narrow down the implementation of Biblical laws. Upon the five-word rule: *Lo tevashel gdi bachalev immo* =“Thou shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk” [Ex. 23:19; 34:16] the rabbinic midrash constructed an elaborate, detailed system of separating dairy products from meat: These foods should not be eaten in the same meal, nor cooked in the same pots and pans, nor served on the same plates etc... On the other hand Biblical law permits parents to bring their disobedient son to court and declare: “This son of ours does not hearken unto our voice” [Deut. 21:20] and have the court condemn their rebellious son to death by stoning... The rabbis of the second century were apparently not happy with this Biblical law, so their hermeneutic claims that since the parents say “not hearken to **our voice**” instead of **to our voices**, this law is valid only when both father and mother have exactly the same voice, but not

if the father's voice is a soprano and the mother's voice is bass or baritone or vice-versa. It also follows that both parents must be exactly of the same height... [Talmud, Sandhedrin 71a] Thus, by means of creative midrash the rabbis added more restrictions on carrying out this law, until they finally conclude that it is written in Deuteronomy only for the purpose of theoretical study ("Drosh vakabel sachar"), but not for practical observance...

To the best of my knowledge, Christian hermeneutics paid less attention to the legal code in the Pentateuch and more attention to the vision of the prophets, especially to Isaiah, whose prophecies were interpreted as paving the road to the New Testament. My elementary and high school Bible teachers in Israel had similar priorities, but for different reasons... We thoroughly studied the early and later Prophets, but only 3 out of 27 chapters in the book of Leviticus. Why? These teachers were secular Jews. They loved the TaNaKh (the Hebrew Bible) mainly since it is the basis of our national, linguistic and cultural identity, but they did their best to ignore its religious aspects. In order to elucidate this approach I wish to quote a 67 year old document, which refers twice to our Bible: The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel (May 1948). The opening sentence claims that "In the Land of Israel the Jewish people emerged, and in this land developed its cultural and religious character... and bequeathed the entire world **the eternal Book of Books**⁵". We should note that the founders of modern Israel acknowledge that we, Jews, have not kept the Bible as our private possession, but shared it with all humankind... Even more surprising is the second half of the Declaration, which expresses a commitment that the new State of Israel will be established on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace as **envisioned by the Prophets of Israel**" - Did they include Moses among these prophets? Most probably not! At this stage the declaration singles out the prophets since most of them protested against the emphasis on religious ritual, and preached that social justice is more important than feeding God with rams, sheep and goats...

I know it seems strange to many of us how can secular, atheist people love the Bible and study it when God is such an important participant in almost every book of the Bible? May be it is one of the great advantages of this book

⁵ Prof. Isaiah Leibowitz protested against this statement, saying that the Bible itself claims that the Law was given to our ancestors in Sinai, outside of the Promised Land.

that you do not have to believe in God to find wisdom and eternal values of justice and love in this book...

Another concept that is shared by most Jews is that the Hebrew Bible should be read and studied IN HEBREW. Every translation is by definition also an interpretation, and every interpretation is biased. Only when reading the Bible in Hebrew you find out that there are two different verbs: h.r.g. =to kill; r.tz.h =to murder, and hence the Ten Commandments warn us "Thou shall not murder" rather than "Thou shall not kill". Another well known example is the difference between 'Betula' – a virgin, and 'Alma' – a young woman, and since not every betula is also alma, and not every alma is necessarily betula, Isaiah was speaking about alma – a young woman who happened, like most women in Biblical times, to get married already at age 12 or 13, it was not surprising that she became pregnant...

There is no way to convince a secular Jew that our Bible, the TaNaKh, is the word of God, since he or she does not believe in God. Similarly there is no way to convince an Orthodox Jew that the Bible is the literary product of human authors and poets. There is one thing both of them should agree with: There is no other book in Jewish History or in the history of mankind that attracted so much attention, that has been the grounds for so many commentaries and scholarly works, and supplied building blocks for so many ideas and religions. My own perception of the Hebrew Bible is that it was written by human beings who were endowed with Divine inspiration! This Divine inspiration had different impacts on different minds in different generations... It is our sacred task to prove that the common denominator of all human beings, namely: being created in God's image, is far more essential than the cultural, ethnic and religious differences between them, between us...

Streszczenie:

Artykuł przedstawia na przykładach podstawowe cechy żydowskiej interpretacji Biblii takie jak: położenie głównego akcentu na Pięcioksięgu, konieczność lektury Biblii w języku hebrajskim, twórcze rozwinięcie praw Tory poprzez jej midraszową interpretację. Wspólną cechą interpretacji chrześcijańskiej i świeckiej interpretacji żydowskiej jest położenie większego akcentu na księgach prorockich Biblii. Świętym obowiązkiem każdej z interpretacji biblijnej, jest

wykazanie, że wspólnym mianownikiem wszystkich ludzkich istot jest bycie stworzonym na obraz Boga.

Słowa kluczowe: żydowska i chrześcijańska interpretacja Biblii, midrasz, hermeneutyka rabiniczna