

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

This week's shiurim are dedicated by Joseph and Phyllis Eisenman
in honor of Judah L. Eisenman

Shiur #01: Introduction

Over the last few generations we have witnessed a heartening phenomenon: a renaissance of *Tanakh* (Bible) study amongst Jewry in general, and in the *battei midrash* of the Religious-Zionist public in particular. After hundreds of years during which *Tanakh* study occupied no place of any significance in the curricula of *yeshivot* and other educational institutions, it has now become an integral component of every stream within the Israeli educational system. The return to *Tanakh* study has also included a return to engagement with the "*peshat*" – the plain or literal meaning of the text – and has led to the exploration of profound and fascinating new layers of the text. This process is, of course, related to the process of the return of the Jewish people to its land, which has led to a broadening of the interest in the concrete and material aspects of the Bible, with hikes through different parts of the country and familiarity with the archaeological remains of the past.

However, the return to in-depth study of the plain text has also brought in its wake new challenges: the response to complex questions raised by *Tanakh* study – both in its own right, and in relation to various discoveries that have been made in the last few centuries.

For the past approximately two hundred years, academic Bible scholarship has proposed views that are inconsistent with traditional Jewish belief. Biblical scholars, who were not committed to any religious world-view, concluded that the *Tanakh* is a human document with no Divine or prophetic source. This perception was grounded in several different areas, including literary analysis of the text, archaeological discoveries, and the growing body of knowledge on the Ancient Near East. Although these academic views have been closely bound up with the secular – at some stages, even anti-Semitic – beliefs of the scholars themselves, the questions and problems that served as their raw materials nevertheless demand renewed attention.

In the past, such questions did not occupy most of the religious world, whether because religious circles were not exposed to them or because they did not regard them with any seriousness. However, in the last generation significant changes have taken place. The in-depth study of the plain text brought these questions to the fore and demanded answers that were more deeply thought-out than those which might have

sufficed in the past. The academic scene has changed as well, with many scholars in Israel and around the world addressing biblical literature in a serious and professional manner, more concerned with scholarship and objectivity than with personal agendas. There has also been increased exposure to the world of biblical research – both in professional terms, within various academic frameworks, and through the communications revolution which has made a tremendous volume of knowledge, in every relevant field, instantly accessible.

This exposure demands a more in-depth examination of the basic assumptions of the academic world, and rabbis and Jewish philosophers have taken up this challenge. The pioneers who first addressed biblical criticism in nineteenth century Germany, such as Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffmann and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, had their work continued in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Prof. Umberto Cassuto, and in the last generation in Israel by renowned scholars such as Rabbi Mordechai Breuer and Rabbi Yoel bin Nun. As part of this process it became clear that the worlds of academia and of the yeshiva are not necessarily doomed to a head-on collision of unbridgeable contradictions and intractable hostility. Many of the fundamental differences between the two worlds arise not from the definition of the data and the analysis of objective facts, but rather from their interpretation. Likewise, it became clear that some of the fundamental questions at the center of biblical study had been addressed already by medieval rabbinic scholars, who had on many occasions provided surprising answers which frequently have not received the exposure that they deserve.

My aim in this series is to summarize the approach that has been consolidated over the past generation among serious Orthodox *Tanakh* scholars who are also well-versed in the realm of academic biblical scholarship. This approach has developed primarily at Yeshivat Har Etzion and the adjacent Yaacov Herzog Teachers' College, and these institutions have become a world center for *Tanakh* study. The essence of this approach is faith in the sanctity of the Books of *Tanakh* and their Divine origin, and the belief that with this faith we are able to examine the questions raised by biblical criticism; to determine which of its claims necessitate fresh insights in Torah, and to distinguish them from those which stem from a world-view alien to traditional belief and whose conclusions are not necessitated by the evidence.

Academic study of the Bible has therefore also led to some positive phenomena; it has been the vehicle for new insights and developments in the study of Torah. This approach has its foundation in the well-known teaching of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook:

In general, this is a great principle in the battle of ideas – that for every view that appears to contradict some matter in the Torah, we must first not necessarily deny it, but rather build the palace of Torah over it. We are thereby elevated by it, and it is for the sake of this elevation that these views are revealed. Afterwards, when we are not troubled by anything, we are equipped, with full confidence, to confront that, too.^[1]

It is important to emphasize that my intention is not for this series to serve as a tool in a struggle against the world of academic scholarship, in the sense of “Know what to answer a heretic” ([Avot 2:14](#)). The questions which have been intensified by biblical criticism deserve to be answered – for the sake of attaining a better understanding of God's word as revealed in *Tanakh*. A religious person is obligated, first and foremost, to establish his faith upon the foundations of his own inner truth, and if certain issues challenge his belief, he must seek ways to integrate them with his world of faith.

At the same time, there is also public and educational importance to dealing with these issues. In recent years I have witnessed increasing distress on the part of graduates of the religious educational system – especially those who have gone on to study at institutions of higher education, and at some stage have been exposed to the world of academic Bible study. This exposure sometimes presents them with questions to which they feel they have no answers; at other times they are astounded and shocked by the dismissal of the entire way of thought that they were brought up with. In some instances they are even angry at the religious educational system for failing to prepare them for this challenge. This reality is problematic in several respects, and it is of great importance that at some stage students are exposed to the fundamental questions and problems, and the various solutions that religiously-committed scholars have proposed. As stated, I believe that these questions lead to a deeper and more genuine understanding of the Torah in and of itself. I am also aware that confronting these questions will allow one to consolidate a broad and firm religious outlook that is aware of the general picture and charts its own path within it.

The first section in the series will examine the question of the authorship of the Torah: first I present the relatively limited references to this question within *Tanakh* itself, and thereafter the various approaches proposed by *Chazal* (the talmudic sages) for understanding the ways in which the Torah was consolidated and edited.

The second section will address one of the first questions raised by the early biblical critics: the existence of verses in the Torah that appear to be written at a later date than that ascribed to them by Jewish tradition. I shall address the approaches to this question among medieval Jewish scholars, and discuss the ramifications of the phenomenon – if indeed it exists – with regard to when the Torah in general was written.

The third section addresses the phenomenon of contradictions and repetitions in biblical verses, and reviews the "documentary hypothesis" (Wellhausen hypothesis) with its underlying assumptions, its literary and historical aspects, and the problems and alternatives associated with it. As a contrast to the "documentary hypothesis" I present an extensive review of the "aspects theory" (*shitat ha-bechinot*) developed by Rabbi Mordekhai Breuer, from the perspective of its later developments.

The fourth section deals with the composition of the Books of the Prophets and Writings (*Neviim and Ketuvim*), based on the Midrash and various opinions among the medieval commentators. I also examine the possibility of implementing the "aspects theory" regarding these Books too, and conclude with a detailed discussion of the composition of *Sefer Yishayahu*.

The next two sections discuss topics related to archaeological discoveries of recent generations. Section 5 addresses the well-known dispute between different groups of archaeologists (maximalists and minimalists), with a presentation of the fundamental questions regarding a number of periods: the period of the forefathers, the Egyptian servitude, the conquest and settlement of the land, and the period of the monarchy of David and Shlomo. This section reviews the questions arising from the existence or absence of various findings, and discusses the general relationship between *Tanakh* and archaeology. Section 6 focuses on the Ancient Near East, which produced several texts – dated before the revelation of the *Tanakh* – featuring elements that parallel sections in the Torah, both in prose and in legal units. I discuss here the significance of these discoveries.

Section 7 addresses the precise wording of the biblical text itself (*nusach*). We will look at the accuracy of the Masoretic text, over the course of its development, present other manuscript versions of the Biblical text, and examine the significance of the variations in *nusach* for various exegetical possibilities.

The next two sections deal with the fundamental question of the study of *Tanakh* on the plain, or literal, level (*peshat*). Section 8 addresses the relationship between the straightforward interpretation of the text and *midrashei aggada*,^[2] and presents the approach of the medieval commentators, who noted the importance of drawing a distinction between the various levels on which verses can be understood. Section 9 discusses the relationship between the straightforward reading of the text and *midrash Halakha*,^[3] and presents different models for explaining the discrepancy that sometimes exists between these two realms, with an examination of the fundamental questions pertaining to Halakha and the ways in which its rulings are determined.

The final section concerns a question that has generated much public discussion in recent years: the proper attitude towards the complex description of central characters in *Tanakh* and the descriptions of their misdeeds that arise from the plain reading of the text. We will look at the position of *Chazal* and the medieval commentators on this subject, and also discuss the theoretical and educational questions arising from these positions.

Obviously, the material related to these questions is endless, and within the limited scope of this series I shall not be able to address every detail and every aspect of every topic; I aim to cover only the central points. It must also be noted that the vast majority of the discussion here, and the fundamental approaches and positions set forth, were stated long ago by the classical Jewish thinkers and sages. If there is

anything new in my presentation, it consists of the gathering of these various topics into a single collection, with the aim of presenting a summary of the relevant problems and the various ways of dealing with them, in accordance with the approach described above that values engaging with, rather than hiding from, challenges to our faith. At the same time I wish to emphasize that different people address every subject in different ways, and the responsibility for what I have written here rests with me alone.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] *Iggerot ha-Re'aya*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem 5722), letter 134, p. 164. Rav Kook writes in a similar manner elsewhere, too. For example: "All the words and paths that lead to the ways of heresy themselves lead, fundamentally, if we seek out their source, to a greater depth of faith, one that is more illuminating and life-giving than the simple understanding that was illuminated prior to the revelation of that outburst" (*Orot ha-Kodesh*, vol. 2 [Jerusalem 5724], p. 547); "We cannot deny that there are many good things even in books that are deficient in many places... and truth is more beloved than all else, and it is specifically in that that God is to be praised and the banner of the believer's faith is raised" (*Iggerot ha-Re'aya*, vol. 2 [Jerusalem 5745], letter 255, p. 20).

^[2] *Chazal's* interpretations of the narrative sections of *Tanakh*.

^[3] *Chazal's* interpretations of the legal sections of *Tanakh*.