

BOOK REVIEWS

Man and God: Studies in Biblical Theology, by ELIEZER BERKOVITS (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969).

Reviewed by
Shnayer Z. Leiman

In the eighteenth letter of his *Nineteen Letters*, Samson Raphael Hirsch issued a clarion call for the renewed study of Scripture, Talmud, and Midrash. He urged that the texts be read and studied "in order to live by them; to draw from them the teachings of Judaism concerning God, the world, mankind and Israel, according to history and precept; to know Judaism out of itself; to learn from its own utterances its wisdom of life."¹ Regarding Scripture and Talmud, Hirsch had more to say:

The beginning should be made with the Bible. Its language should first be understood, and then, out of the spirit of the language, the spirit of the speakers therein should be inferred. The Bible should not be studied as an interesting object of philological or antiquarian research, or as a basis for theories of taste, or for amusement. It should be studied as a foundation of a new science. Nature should be contemplated with the spirit of David; history should be perceived

with the ear of an Isaiah, and then, with the eye thus aroused, with the ear thus opened, the doctrine of God, world, man, Israel and Torah should be drawn from the Bible, and should become an idea, or system of ideas, fully comprehended. It is in this spirit that the Talmud should be studied. We should search in the Halakhah only for further elucidation and amplification of those ideas we already know from the Bible.²

Not surprisingly, Hirsch's plea fell on deaf ears; his dream was never realized. Only Jews committed to the teachings of the Written and Oral Torah could take Hirsch seriously—and in the century and a half following the publication of his *Nineteen Letters*, their every effort was devoted to survival—physical and spiritual. What little intellectual energy modern Orthodoxy could muster was spent on talmudic and halakhic study (in a valiant effort to maintain the excellence of East European Torah scholarship) and on popular expositions of Judaism (to render Judaism meaningful in an increasingly secular age). Other areas of Jew-

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ish scholarship suffered mostly from neglect. Thus, seventy years of the twentieth century have elapsed with no Jew having issued an original, comprehensive commentary on all or most of Scripture. No Abarbanel, no Malbim in this century. This is not to demean the contribution of twentieth century Jewish Biblical scholars such as Arnold B. Ehrlich, Max Margolis, Ezekiel Kauffmann, and E. A. Speiser; any new philological commentary on Scripture, if at all meaningful, must take into account their insight into the plain sense of Scripture. Just as Rashi, Ramban, and Abarbanel marshalled whatever evidence was available in their day, whether linguistic,³ archaeological,⁴ or outright borrowings from Christian exegetes,⁵ so too the modern Jewish exegete must bring to bear on Scripture the vast historical, philological, and archaeological evidence uncovered by modern scholarship.⁶

This and more. For the Biblical student envisioned by Hirsch studies the texts "in order to live by them; to draw from them the teachings of Judaism concerning God, the world, mankind and Israel . . ." The primary task of the Jewish exegete, then, goes beyond explaining the plain sense of the Biblical text. It is rather to abstract a theology of Judaism from the sacred texts, one which will serve the Jew as a *guide for reflection and practice*. The frequent "Torah teaches you proper conduct" in Talmud and Rashi, the moral lessons or *toaliyoth* of Ralbag are as essential to Jewish exegesis as they are conspicuously absent from modern

Biblical commentaries. No Abarbanel, no Malbim, in this century.

In the light of the above, the timely significance of Dr. Berkovits' *Man and God* can be seen in proper perspective. Here indeed is a Hirschian Biblical theology, *i.e.*, a modern attempt to abstract theological notions "out of the Bible itself, to learn from its own utterances its wisdom of life." The volume is essentially a dialogue between Berkovits and Scripture. No recourse to history, philology, or archaeology here; only rarely does the author invoke the name of a contemporary Protestant Biblical scholar (even then, mostly for polemical purposes), less frequently does the name of a medieval Jewish commentator cross his lips (Ibn Ezra and Ramban are each mentioned once; Abarbanel and Malbim do not appear). Therein rest the volume's many strengths and its only weakness. Its strengths: a fertile mind, unfettered and unencumbered by the findings of the past 1,000 years of Biblical scholarship, pitted against the most fertile and unwieldy of books. Berkovits' vision is clear, and he sees much that others have not seen. The volume provides a welcome breath of fresh air and serves as a reminder to all that the pedantic concerns with Lower Criticism and literary analysis must give way to a far more fruitful and significant aspect of Biblical study—an understanding of Biblical teaching. Moreover, the volume proves once again that the cumulative scholarship of preceding generations has by no means exhausted what needs to be said concerning even the most elementary

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teachings of Scripture. Most important, Dr. Berkovits' approach to Scripture reminds us how the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* went about studying the Book of Books, and proves that two millennia later, their exegetical approach has not exhausted its usefulness. Like Ben Azzai,⁷ the author "joins passages from the Torah with parallel passages in the Prophets, and passages in the Prophets with parallel passages in the Hagiographa; and the words of the Torah glow as on the day they were given at Sinai."⁸ Nor does Berkovits choose his Biblical passages at random. On the contrary, his citations are carefully chosen, his elucidatory comments well thought out. He anticipates his critic by explaining away (though not always, and sometimes tortuously) those verses which militate against his proposed interpretation.

Berkovits' approach to Scripture is that of a Jewish Socrates. The author's philosophical disposition and terminology are everywhere evident. By posing some very basic questions, Berkovits quickly makes the reader aware of his own ignorance. Some of the issues that he raises, and explores in depth, are:

- 1) What does the phrase "I am the Lord (*ani ha-shem*)"⁹ signify?
- 2) What does the phrase "I am the Lord your God (*ani ha-shem e-lohekhem*)"¹⁰ signify?
- 3) Why are these phrases tacked on to certain verses in Scripture and not to others?
- 4) In conjunction with God or man, what do the terms *kedushah*, *mishpat*, *zedakah*, *emeth*, and *emunah* signify?

Berkovits proves quite convincingly

that the conventional renderings of these terms have not done justice to the meanings intended by the Biblical authors. He then offers his own interpretations of the terms listed above. Often, these are striking in their originality and aptness. It is not always apparent, however, that *all* of the author's interpretations do justice to Hebrew Scripture. And this brings us to what in this reviewer's eyes is the volume's only weakness.

If Berkovits' independence from all those who preceded him enabled him to see more than many students of the Bible, it also, on occasion, obstructed his vision. For the traditional Jewish exegetes often use the same method as Berkovits to solve the very issues he raises. Occasionally, they anticipate his conclusions (thus rendering them superfluous);¹¹ more often, they arrive at conclusions that differ considerably from his (indicating that the evidence does not point in only one direction).¹² Moreover, some of the terms investigated by Berkovits have received extensive treatment by contemporary scholars—Jew and Gentile—whose exhaustive studies take into account both Biblical and extra-Biblical evidence. The latter often sheds much light on otherwise ambiguous passages in Scripture.¹³ Berkovits has limited himself to an in-depth investigation of the primary source, *i.e.*, Scripture. However penetrating his analysis of Scripture—and it is indeed penetrating—it is only a beginning. The scholar, after investigating the primary sources and arriving at his conclusions, must test those conclusions against the sec-

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ondary sources, by which I mean the traditional Jewish translations and medieval commentaries, and the findings of modern scholarship. Such a test enables the scholar to determine:

- 1) Whether or not he has gathered all the evidence others have gathered.
- 2) Whether or not he has introduced new evidence.
- 3) How others have construed the evidence.
- 4) Whether or not he has properly evaluated the evidence.

If Berkovits did test *all* his conclusions against those of the secondary sources (and simply dismissed the latter out of hand) it was not apparent to this reviewer. As indicated above, no new Jewish commentary on Scripture, whether

philological or theological,¹⁴ can afford to ignore the contributions of medieval and modern scholarship.

Aside from its analysis of the terms mentioned above, Dr. Berkovits' volume is replete with novel interpretations of stray Biblical passages.¹⁵ Indeed, it is a veritable encyclopedia of Biblical interpretation. Hopefully, Dr. Berkovits will continue to publish studies in Biblical theology. The serious study of Scripture and Jewish theology can ill-afford to lose his leadership and patronage. Perhaps *Man and God* will initiate among observant Jews the long overdue renaissance of Biblical study envisioned almost 150 years ago by Samson Raphael Hirsch.

NOTES

1. *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, Bernard Drachman translation revised by Jacob Breuer, N. Y., 1960, p. 127.

2. *Loc. cit.*

3. Rashi frequently cites Semitic and even some non-Semitic languages. These include Aramaic (e.g., see comment on Num. 5:2), Arabic (Gen. 30:14), Persian (Deut. 21:14), Greek (Gen. 35:8), and Latin (Gen. 42:21). Often, but not always, Rashi drew his comparative linguistic comments from talmudic and midrashic literature. For Rashi as a linguist, see J. Pereira-Mendoza, *Rashi as Philologist*, Manchester University Press, 1940.

Ramban probably surpassed Rashi as a linguist; his obvious mastery of Aramaic (Deut. 21:14) and Arabic (Gen. 48:20) and his familiarity with Greek (Ex. 12:12) and Latin (Ex. 30:23) reflect his thirteenth century Judaeo-Spanish cultural background. On Ramban's considerable linguistic talent, see M. More-sheth, "Ramban ke-Balshan," *Sinai* 60 (1967) 193-210.

4. See, for example, Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, ed. Chavel, vol. 2, p. 507, where he offers a detailed description of inscribed Judaeon *shekel* and *half shekel* weights he examined at Acre (modern archaeologists have yet to discover exact parallels to the weights described by Ramban), which he then

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adduces in support of Rashi's comment on Ex. 21:32. Cf. Ramban's comment on Gen. 35:16, where he mentions that he measured the distance from Rachel's Tomb to Bethlehem, and adduces that measurement in support of Rashi's interpretation of Gen. 35:16.

5. See Abarbanel, *Commentary on the Early Prophets* (ed. Jerusalem, 1955), p. 520, who after citing the opinions of both Jewish and Christian exegetes, adds: "Truthfully, I find their [the Christians'] interpretation more satisfying than all the interpretations of the aforementioned Jewish scholars."

6. A parade example of the contribution of modern archaeology to the understanding of Scripture is the heretofore enigmatic *pim* mentioned in 1 Sam. 13:21. Targum, Rashi, Radak, and most commentators considered it a derivative of *peh* "mouth, edge" and rendered it either nominally "a tool used for sharpening, a file," or adjectively "sharp edged, many toothed." Since the plural of *peh* never takes the masculine form, the forced nature of their interpretations was evident. Today, the meaning of *pim* is beyond dispute. Archaeologists have discovered numerous weights, each weighing about 8 grams, and inscribed with the word *pim*. Such weights were commonly used to weigh precious metals used for legal payment. Clearly, 1 Sam. 13:21 is to be rendered: "And the charge was a *pim* for the ploughshares . . ." For discussion and photographs, see D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (Harper Torchbooks), pp. 227-230; for the etymological history of *pim*, see E. A. Speiser, *Oriental and Biblical Studies*, pp. 156-159.

The above rendering of 1 Sam. 13:21 appeared in the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation of Hebrew Scripture and, since then, has been taken into all subsequent translations. Yet many who teach the Book of Samuel remain unaware of the new evidence bearing on its interpretation. Not having been properly trained by their own instructors, many Jewish teachers are not prepared to cope with the findings of modern Biblical scholarship. Because of their unpreparedness, they inadvertently and perforce misinform their students or withhold information crucial for the proper understanding of Scripture. Teachers, I suppose, can hardly be held responsible for their ignorance of a discipline they were never taught and to which they have little or no access. It is somewhat more difficult to be a *melammed zekhuth* for modern Jewish Biblical commentators who choose to ignore archaeological evidence (such as Rabbi C. D. Rabinowitz, *Daath Soferim: Shmuel, ad. loc.*). It is the commentator's task to present a sovereign interpretation of Scripture, based upon all the available evidence, which can then serve those less expert than himself—i.e., teachers and students—as a guide to the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. By neglecting the findings of twentieth century Biblical scholarship (based upon the many writings and artifacts discovered in this century such as the vast Ugaritic literature; Hittite, Sumerian, and Akkadian law codes; annals of the Assyrian and Chaldean kings describing the fall of Israel and Judea; the Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.), the commentator does not avail himself of all the evidence and performs a disservice to the cause of Jewish education.

7. Ben Azzai, like his illustrious colleagues, was a Biblical concordance incarnate. Moderns have recourse to the printed concordance which, if more

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systematic, has also proven less productive for popular Biblical study. Few Jews own concordances, still fewer use them. And knowledge of the fact that the printed concordance is available when needed prevents the few who occasionally use it from committing Scripture to memory. Since, however, it is apparent that students are not about to commit Scripture to memory, and that the printed concordance is here to stay, yeshivah high schools would perhaps do well to initiate students into its proper and habitual use.

8. *Vayyikra Rabbah* 16:4. For *samehin* = glow, see H. L. Ginsberg, "Lexicographical Notes," in *Hebräische Wortforschung* (Walter Baumgartner Festschrift), p. 72.

9. E.g., Lev. 18:5.

10. E.g., Lev. 19:3.

11. See, for example, Berkovits' accounting for "I am the Lord" in Ex. 6:8 (pp. 39-40) and cf. Ibn Ezra's closing comment and the comments of R. Bahaya and Ralbag, *ad loc.*

12. See, for example, the comments of R. Bahaya, Abarbanel, Alshikh, and Malbim to Leviticus, Chapters 18 and 19. All ask, as does Berkovits, why "I am the Lord" and "I am the Lord your God" appear as tags to specific verses in these chapters; none arrive at his conclusions.

Again, Berkovits has great difficulty with the conventional renderings of Deut. 6:25 "and it shall be *zedakah* unto us." Berkovits states "we doubt that anyone is able to associate any good meaning with the statement that such a practice of doing God's commandments will be *s'daqah* unto the one who pursues it" (p. 298). One need merely glance at a host of translators and commentators from Targum to Rabbi David Hoffmann in order to list Jewish exegetes who associate a very "good meaning" with *zedakah*, i.e., *merit*—a meaning more persuasive than that proffered by Berkovits. So too *zedakah* at Gen. 15:6; cf. Targum, Rashi, and Sforno, *ad loc.* as against Berkovits' gratuitous interpretation on p. 296. This is not to deny that the range of *zedakah* includes many of the nuances suggested by Berkovits; but in the instances listed above, I found his interpretations unconvincing.

13. Cf. note 6. In the light of the extra-Biblical evidence, Berkovits' interpretation of Judges 11 (p. 29) seems highly unlikely. He suggests that it was meaningful to speak to Ammonites about a transcendent Y-wh because they too recognized a Supreme God who ruled over all men, while Chemosh was merely a national-mediatory god of the Ammonites. But the Moabite Stone—an ancient Moabite inscription discovered in 1868 which commemorates King Mesha's victory over Israel—indicates otherwise. In it, Chemosh and Y-wh are depicted as rivals; Mesha tells how he dragged the vessels (?) of Y-wh before Chemosh. Clearly, it would not have been meaningful to speak to the Moabites, or to their Ammonite neighbors, of Y-wh as a transcendent supreme judge of the universe. For extensive discussion of the Moabite Stone and bibliography, see H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, vol. 2, pp. 168-179; for a convenient English translation of the text, and photograph, see D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 195-199.

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Similarly, Berkovits' discussion of *shafat* (p. 231 ff.) and his attempt to explain why the Judges were called *shofetim* (p. 234) would have benefited much from numerous earlier studies treating the primary sense, and range of meaning, of *shafat* in ancient Semitic languages. Cf. the brief summary in E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible), comment on Gen. 18:25, p. 134. Berkovits' discussion of "*hesed* and *emeth*" (p. 285 ff.) has been anticipated by others; the phrase has been correctly identified as a hendiadys (a single thought expressed by two words connected by "and"). Here too, cf. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, comment on Gen. 24:27, p. 180.

14. This is especially true if the theological argument is grounded in philological theory, as in Berkovits' volume. While poor philological theory need not necessarily yield poor theology (cf. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, p. 6), a weak philological foundation often pulls the rug out from under the feet of—and sometimes topples—an otherwise sturdy theological structure. Not a few of Samson Raphael Hirsch's pupils rejected his theological teaching *in toto* or in part when they discovered that its linguistic underpinnings had no real basis in the linguistic science developed by nineteenth and twentieth century philologists. See K. Kohler, *Personal Reminiscences of My Early Life*, p. 8; cf. R. Kirchheim, *Die neue Exegetenschule*, *passim*.

15. Berkovits' argumentation for, and clever rendering of, Prov. 30:9b "or lest I be poor, and steal, and *usurp* the name of my God" (p. 97) is typical.

After the Tradition — Essays on Modern Jewish Writing, by ROBERT ALTER (E. P. Dutton & Co., 1969).

Reviewed by Wilhelm Braun

These fifteen eminently readable essays written during the Sixties by a critic who is both learned in Jewish matters and familiar with American and Israeli literature offer careful literary evaluations of a number of important contemporary Jewish authors. They are also a series of experiments assaying the "authentic Jewishness" in which the author reveals how profoundly these writers, though steeped in secular cultures, have conveyed the insights that their people have lived by.

Rarely can Jewish writers be fair to Jewish themes in their work. Because of ignorance or aversion, or from sympathy and enthusiasm, they tend to misinterpret or inflate their heritage. For example, Mr. Alter censures Leslie Fiedler for inflating the Biblical Joseph into a Jewish vendor and interpreter of dreams, an archetype of the poet and therapist, while on the other hand, he commends Kafka's tortuous world where moral obligations so often seem to derive from distant and unreachable authorities as the more authentically Jewish formulation of a spiritual problem.