

R. JUDAH HE-HASID : EARLY BIBLE EXEGETE REDISCOVERED

by Gershon Brin

In 1975, an edition of the commentaries to the Torah of R. Judah he-Hasid (1150-1217), edited by Isaak B. Lange on the basis of manuscripts and other exegetical works (such as *Moshav Zekanim*, *Paneah Raza* and others) in which his commentaries are quoted, was published. (On this, see the introduction to the book).¹

In this edition, R. Judah's commentaries are presented according to the order of the Biblical verses (a departure from the order of the manuscript, which follows the sequence of the weekly synagogue lections without strict attention to the internal order of the verses). It also includes some commentaries on the weekly prophetic readings, as well as a few exegetical remarks on the Five Scrolls.

The publication of an edition of R. Judah he-Hasid's Torah commentaries is a splendid opportunity for us to become acquainted with this unique exegetical personality. Until now, we only knew him through his *Sefer Hasi-dim* ("the Book of the Pious") and other works ascribed to him. Even though he refers to the scriptural text in these other writings, this was insufficient to acquaint us with his basic exegetical method. Now, through the publication of these commentaries, we can observe the method and approach

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1. *Torah Commentaries of Rabbi Judah he-Hasid*, edited by Isaak S. Lange, Jerusalem, 1975.

of this important exegete, as a result of which we ought to include him together with the other major Medieval Jewish Bible exegetes of Europe, such as Rashi, Rashbam, and the like.

I will address myself here to the basic exegetical method of the Hasid as it emerges from the study of selected passages from the Torah beginning with a discussion of technical matters relating to the commentary; going on to present his pioneering approach to certain problems of Biblical commentary; and clarifying his conceptual stance as it appears in his comments on religious-philosophical questions. I will also deal with his method for determining the relative date of different passages, his approach to questions of *realia*, his method for dealing with difficult passages, etc.

Due to limitations of space, I will formulate my ideas with extreme brevity, and on each topic only one or two examples out of the many possible ones.

I. The Craft of Exegesis

The commentary was written by R. Judah's son, R. Moses Zaltman, who makes mention of various biographical details in the life of his father. The form of writing is personal. Thus, for example, he writes, "my teacher — father interpreted" (Gen. 23:20): "R. Isaac of Russia told me in my teacher — father's name" (Gen. 24:12): "my father asked" (Num. 6:23); and many others.

The son himself records his father's words from memory: "my teacher — father said to me" (I Kings 18:15, p. 129). From the biographical details which he records it appears that he wrote this book after his father's death.² This is implied in various passages, both those in which he mentions his father in the past tense ("father said to us" (Num. 17:5)) or those which make specific reference to his death: "after his death I remembered that at the end of his life my teacher — father had said..." (Num. 4:6) or "a year before his death he said to me that which is written above" (Ex. 20:17).

In addition to those things which R. Moses set down on the basis of his own memory and notes, he occasionally utilized passages which his father had set down in writing. Thus, in his commentary to Gen. 29:24 we read "all this I wrote down from my father's manuscript," or on Cant. 4:13, p. 149, "afterwards I found in my father's writings."

In this commentary we are dealing with a peculiar phenomenon as far as clarification of the language of the commentary, etc., is concerned, because

2. See Lange's proofs of this point in his edition, p. 8.

this is one of the few cases in which the words of the commentator are not transmitted by his own hand, but via the reports of those who heard them. In this case, the one who transmits it must report on the work of interpretation, and to define it in appropriate terms.

The commentary is filled with expressions which indicate knowledge of exegetical technique. Thus, "Rashi interpreted... but this is its meaning" (Gen. 18:12); "Father pointed out... and he brought as proof..." (Ex. 3:18). The phrase *peshat* (i.e. literal meaning) appears in many places: "On first impression the *peshat* is..." (Ex. 24:7); "This view is astonishing... but this is the *peshat*" (Gen. 29:20); "my father used to interpret according to the *peshat* as follows" (Ex. 11:8). In a certain passage, R. Moses informs us that "here my teacher—father did not follow the *peshat*, but interpreted according to the *midrash*" (Ex. 32:32). In various passages, mention is made on the different considerations and possibilities which stood before the commentator and his means of ultimately deciding. Thus, for example, when the comment opens with the words "my teacher—father asked" (Ex. 11:8) or "father used to ask, 'why is it written about the ark...'" (Num. 4:6, p. 162), attention is drawn to the specific difficulties of the verse. This is not characteristic of all the medieval commentators, for they often approach the solution of a problem without citing the difficulty. In such phrases as "one may say..." (Ex. 12:43), the exegete commences on the solution of the difficulties. Likewise, such phrases as "my father asked... and answered..." (Gen. 12:3, 19) or "he brought as proof of his interpretation..." (Gen. 22:1).

All of this material greatly enriches our knowledge of the methods of interpretation, the terminology used, etc. However, I cannot enlarge upon it here.

II. Books and their Writing

Examination of the commentary of R. Judah he-Hasid reveals that matters relating to the identity and writing of various books mentioned in Scripture occupy a relatively large place. When we combine this with other emphases found in his commentary on related matters such as the question of the editing of the material found in the Torah, the manner of its composition, etc., some of the unique interests of this exegetical personality becomes clear to us. Without entering into details, the mere fact of his raising these subjects is sufficient to make R. Judah he-Hasid an unusual figure in his generation. From this viewpoint, and particularly from the conclusions which he reached from his studies, R. Judah was hundreds of years in advance of his age. Indeed, only in the modern period do we find a return to these subjects.

1) In Ex. 24:7 the phrase “the book of the covenant” (*Sefer ha-brit*) is mentioned. In his comment to this verse, he-Hasid says that, “according to *peshat*, these are the ten commandments.” As is known, in modern research the phrase, “the book of covenant” is taken as referring to the bloc of laws within the framework of Ex. 20:22-23:33.”³

2) Modern literary thinking is anticipated in R. Judah’s approach to the question of the methods of composition of Biblical works. Thus, in his commentaries on the Book of Psalms, he raises the possibility of the gradual literary development of a given psalm. Psalm 135, for example, was written by Joshua following the model of Psalm 136, which was written by Moses. R. Judah maintains that King David, after he conquers Mt. Zion, “himself added another line” to Psalm 135 (he refers to v. 21). “And it was the practice in those days to correct or revise hymns.” R. Judah goes on to say that certain songs drew the attention of certain composers, who added verses of their own to the earlier text (See his comment to Num. 21:17, p. 184-185). It is not a small thing that R. Judah thinks that a given Biblical text is the outcome of gradual combination and development.

III. Questions Concerning the Composition of the Torah

We shall now discuss the weightier and more significant question of R. Judah’s thoughts on the order of scripture, the date of composition of various portions of the Torah, etc.

R. Judah states that various passages were written at the end of the period of wandering in the desert or, more precisely, during the 40th year. This solution enables him to create a certain distance of time within the activities of Moses, through which he may resolve problems relating to the internal sequence of scripture without any religious difficulties.

A. Questions concerning Sequence

1) Lev. 23:43 reads “that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.” R. Judah states that this verse written in the 40th year after the Exodus. In his opinion, there is a distinction between the commandment to construct booths and its rationale. While the commandment itself was given in the wilderness at the beginning of their wanderings, because it was the Divine will that they dwell in booths and that God conquer cities for them, the reason for the law was stated retrospectively, during the 40th year.

3. So already Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Ch. 8, p. 122.

As a proof text, R. Judah quotes the story of Sihon and Og — “whom Moses and the children of Israel defeated when they came out of Egypt” (Deut. 4:46) — in which the same phrase is used clearly referring to the 40th year. In my opinion, R. Judah sensed the archival tone of this verse, which spoke of the Exodus as a distant event rather than as one which had just occurred, and he therefore attributed it to the end of the Mosaic period.

2) In his commentary to Ex. 16:32, R. Judah concluded that the verses Ex. 16:32-33, 35 are from the fortieth year, it being clear that a verse which ends “and the people of Israel ate the manna forty years” could not have been written before then, because they include a picture of a situation later than that immediately around them. He explains their inclusion within the context on the basis of their association with the subject of manna.

In general, questions dealing with the determination of dating, or at least the relative dating, of portions of scripture seem among the important ones to R. Judah he-Hasid. Thus, he established the relative position of various passages with the intention of resolving other difficulties.

3) R. Judah takes note, in Num. 17:18, that the instruction to write Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi did not solve the *internal* dispute within the tribe of Levi as to the legitimate priesthood, for *another* Levite could have come and claimed that were his name to have been written on the staff “it would also have blossomed.”

This, in turn, allows doubts as to the legitimacy of the preference of Aaron over other Levites. On the other hand, had the incident of the staffs preceded that of Korah, there would have been no need for the incident of the burning and swallowing up of the rebels. R. Judah’s solution is that “the incident of the staffs was earlier,” that is, the story of the staffs preceded that of Korah. This solution solves all of the difficulties raised above. Through his integration of the various incidents, a coherent sequence is established: the incident of the staffs demonstrates the choice of the tribe of Levi as a tribe taking precedence over the other tribes, but no decision is implied as to the preference of Aaron over other representatives of the tribe of Levi with regard to priestly functions. Compare with this the commentary *Moshav Zekanim* on the same verse: “one may say that the sign of the staffs was not for the priesthood . . . but this sign was performed because all the other tribes were aroused against the entire tribe of Levi.”

B. Torah Material in Other Sources

In his commentary to Num. 21:17, R. Judah devotes considerable space to his view that the Torah originally included other writings of Moses, and

that these are not found in our version because “King David removed the isolated psalms of Moses which were in the Five Books and included them in his Book of Psalms.” He also speaks about Psalm 136 elsewhere as a psalm of Moses.

R. Judah’s daring can be appreciated through comparison to the *baraita* quoted in the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 15a, in which there is a discussion of the account of the death of Moses (in Deut. 34:5-12). The disputants there refuse to accept the suggestion that these eight verses were not written by Moses on the grounds that this would weaken the idea of the wholeness of the Torah, while here R. Judah explicitly states that the earliest version of the Torah was more inclusive, and that certain texts were later removed and included elsewhere.

C. Non-Mosaic Torah Passages

R. Judah he-Hasid reaches the height of his innovation on the subject of the writing of the Torah in his comments on certain sections of the Torah which he contends were not written by Moses. Abraham ibn Ezra preceded he-Hasid in this viewpoint, presenting his approach in concentrated form in his exegesis to Deut. 1:2 and Gen. 12:6.⁴ He states that the Torah contains *several* passages which Moses could not possibly have written. R. Judah’s opinion is more complex, in that he not only believes, with ibn Ezra, that there are verses which Moses could not have written, but he also presents his suggestions as to who did write them.

1) Genesis 48. In his commentary to Gen. 48:20, R. Judah distinguishes among three stylistic layers within the text. The first level contains the actual content of the discussion between Jacob and Joseph. In the second, one finds Moses’s words, written during the 40th year of wanderings: “Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope” (RSV — Heb., *shekhem*, shoulder). In the third level, we find the phrase “and thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh” (Ibid, v. 20), on which he comments: “My father interpreted — this does not speak of Jacob but of Moses. Moses placed Ephraim before Manasseh, as the chief of the flag camp, because Jacob had said ‘his younger brother shall be greater than he.’ And Joshua wrote this verse, or the people of the Great Assembly.”⁵

4. R. Judah he-Hasid himself knew Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Gen. 12:6, but he does not interpret the “secret” referred to there as referring to the composition of this verse by Moses, in opposition to Ibn Ezra’s own evident intention. See he-Hasid ad loc. See also S. D. Luzzato, *Kerem Hemed*, 7, p. 71, in which he claims that he-Hasid didn’t understand ibn Ezra correctly.

5. With regard to variant readings in the various manuscripts, see Lange, *ibid.* p. 64.

For had Moses written this verse, it would have read, ‘and I placed Ephraim before Manasseh,’ as it is written afterwards ‘and I have given to you one mountain slope . . .’”

From the alternative formulation, “Joshua wrote it or the men of the Great Assembly,” we may derive R. Judah he-Hasid’s basic approach towards the composition of the Torah. The hypothesis that the verse was written by Joshua is sufficient to resolve the specific textual difficulties raised here, that the verse speaks about Moses and about his deeds. R. Judah’s approach, hinted at here, is that the men of the Great Assembly edited or revised the books of Scripture, including the Torah, and that the verse discussed here bears evidence of their hand. Thus, while the first suggestion (i.e., that Joshua wrote it)⁶ is relatively moderate, and is similar to one approach proposed and ultimately discarded in the above-mentioned discussion in *Bava Batra* — i.e., that Joshua wrote those final verses which describe the death of Moses — his second alternative, the suggestion that the Men of the Great Assembly wrote this verse, is far more radical, containing a hint of an original approach with regard to the general question of the composition of the Torah.

2) Deut. 2:8 states “so we went on, away from our brethren the sons of Esau who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road from Elath and Ezion-geber.” The geographical reality described here seems to R. Judah to be late. In his view, “Ezion-geber was not part of Edom” originally, but as the result of various complicated events it passed into Edomite hands. “This had not yet happened in the days of Moses, but by the time of Solomon it had happened. Therefore, in the time of the Great Assembly, they wrote this verse in the Torah, so that you should not be surprised that Ezion-geber is described as part of Edom in Chronicles (Deut. 2:8, 17).”

Here, too, one finds R. Judah’s broad perspective with regard to the writing of the Torah, according to which the men of the Great Assembly engaged in organizing and editing the material in the Torah, introducing various additions with the goal of updating and explaining the scripture.

IV. *Realia* in his Commentary

Study of R. Judah’s commentary reveals that he paid particular attention to the *realia* aspects of the facts mentioned in the Bible. Taking these factors into consideration, he examined difficulties in the verse, and made use of them to solve textual problems.

6. This is the reading in the Cambridge manuscript.

1) Ex. 29:46 reads, "and they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them." This verse appears as the concluding sentence of the chapter dealing with the building of the Tabernacle and the making of the priestly vestments. Immediately afterwards, the construction of the incense altar is commanded. R. Judah learns from this that "these chapters were placed together to teach that one does not need to wonder, according to the *peshat*, as to where they found accacia trees in the middle of the Sinai desert, for the scripture tells you that before they left Egypt, that same hour the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, 'Tell Israel that I am taking them out on condition that they pledge gold and silver and blue and purple and accacia wood and everything else needed for the Tabernacle,' and they accepted this with love." R. Judah took note of the proximity of the two passages, as well as the problem of *realia* — i.e., how a magnificent Tabernacle could be constructed in the wilderness — and, as there was no source within the text which spoke of the provision of these materials to Israel in a miraculous manner, he combined the two verses mentioned above and concluded that the children of Israel made advance preparations of that which would be needed for the Tabernacle to be erected after their liberation from Egypt.

2) One finds the same spirit in the interpretation of the battle of the Gibeonites with Joshua (p. 116-118 in this edition), in which difficulties are explained by means of *realia*. R. Judah cannot explain the Israelite victory over the Canaanite cities as a miracle or the like. Therefore, he explains the incident of "Sun, stand thou still at Gibeon, and thou Moon in the valley of Aijalon," as a conscious calculation of Joshua's to create appropriate battle conditions in which the meager arms of Israel would not be completely inferior to those of the Canaanites. In his opinion, in order to prevent the enemies of Israel from fleeing to their fortified cities under cover of night, circumstances under which the Israelites would be unable to conquer them due to their inadequate siege weapons. Joshua asked God not to let the sun set "so they were not able to hide . . . and Joshua quickly captured them on the same day, while had it been night they could have fled."

V. Selected Examples of his Interpretation

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss a number of examples of R. Judah's exegesis. I have chosen various passages, in each one of which there is a difficulty of a certain type. Through examining them together, we may learn about several of the approaches and methods used by R. Judah to solve various problems in the area of Biblical exegesis.

A. "...she saw the child, and lo, the lad (RSV-babe) was crying." (Ex. 2:6)

Upon superficial reading, it appears that the passage changes the word used to describe the individual in the basket from “child” (*yeled*) to “lad” (*na’ar*). This is expressed by the Talmud in Sota 12b and by the Midrash, Ex. R. 1:22: “He called him ‘child’ and he called him ‘lad.’” A reason is even given there for this change. According to another interpretation, brought in other sources, these nouns refer to two different persons. R. Judah follows this approach, in identifying the ‘lad’ as Aaron, “for he sat by the shore to see what happen to his brother, he being three years old then, and watched to see what would happen in the end.”

B) The Plagues in Egypt

In his comment to Ex. 7:14, he-Hasid’s son says, “father used to ask why in the Psalms (78:44-51 ; 105:28-36) the plagues are not recorded in the order in which they are described in the Torah.” This question is really a double one: a) why the lists of plagues in the two texts are not identical with regard to *order* and b) why these lists do not agree as to the *number* of the plagues. His solution is that “the plagues occurred twice, once following the order in the Torah, and once mixed up, following the order in Psalms.” He does not relate here to the question of the number of plagues, but in his comments to Ex. 10:21 he solves the problem, by stating that, while only six plagues are mentioned explicitly in the Psalms, the others are alluded to in the verse “He let loose on them his fierce anger, wrath, indignation and distress’ (Ps. 78:49) — “which are four.” What is characteristic of R. Judah’s solution is that the different passages are each interpreted as referring to a different situation — that is, that there is no contradiction between them because each one is true within itself. Following this line of thought, one reaches the peculiar solution according to which there were two separate groups of plagues in Egypt: one of ten and one of seven (or six).

In modern research, one would speak in such a situation of different literary traditions relating to the subject, each of the pictures belonging to a different tradition. What is unique in he-Hasid’s approach is that he maintains the correctness of the two traditions taken cumulatively.

C. Traditions of the Exodus from Egypt

In I Chron. 7:20f., there is a genealogy of the descendants of Ephraim: “the sons of Ephraim: Shuthelah and Bered,” etc., at the end of which Joshua son of Nun is mentioned. He-Hasid concludes from this that the seventh generation following Ephraim, which had built Bet Horon, was prior to the generation of the conquest of Canaan and their leader, Joshua. In light of this analysis, he conjectures that there had been Israelite settlement in Canaan throughout the period of Egyptian bondage in one form or an-

other. "As long as Israel was in Egypt they occasionally went up to the Land of Israel, to the soil of Jacob our father, and built cities there." (Ex. 1:7). In the opinion of his son, the leaders of those who went back to Canaan came from the House of Joseph, thanks to its privileged position within the Egyptian royal court. This is the reason why, in his view, these details are mentioned in the lists dealing with the sons of Ephraim, the descendants of Joseph.

D. The Test in the Binding of Isaac

Among those Biblical passages in which God tests his creatures, Genesis 22, the chapter of the Binding of Isaac, is unique. R. Judah's approach to this chapter was unlike that of any other commentator. The classical exegetes pondered the value of a test for God, for whom everything is known and to whom the answers contained in the future are already revealed. He-Hasid formulates the problem as follows: "Why does the Holy One, blessed be He, need tests? Does he not tell the end from the beginning, and know whether a man will sin or will stand up to the test?" (Comment to Gen. 22:1). But he reaches different conclusions than those exegetes who speak about the test strengthening the one tested or the desire to see whether he will actualize that which exists within himself in potential (Compare Nachmanides *ad locum*). He does not describe God as the initiator of the trial, nor Abraham as the one whose righteousness God wished to prove, but says that the angels initiated the test. In his view, the angels "bet against God, asking 'why do you bestow upon this one (Abraham) more good than to another one?' . . . and they said, 'give us permission to test him, and we will know that it is just that you give him more good than to others.'" Two factors worked upon R. Judah to see the angels as the initiators of the test. One was the lack of need on God's part for a test. The second was the fact that the angels are mentioned in the story of the Binding, and play a special role there. An important verse in this respect is v. 12, in which the angel says, "now I know that you fear God." Commenting on this, R. Judah remarks, "but before this he did not know," and only after he had come to know that Abraham had fulfilled that which was required of him and had taken the sword to slaughter his son "the angel saw that he had stood up to the test, and he said to him 'for now I know.'"

The emphasis on the two words, "now I know," are the basis of this commentary — *now* he knows, "I know" being said in the first person by the angel. In addition, the absence of the phrase, "says the Lord," in the first statement of the angel (v. 11-12) and its appearance a second time (v. 16) are also proof that in the beginning the angel spoke, "and Abraham believed the angel, that God had said to him 'Do not lay your hand on the lad,' even though he had not said 'says the Lord' in the first time."

R. Judah mentions another sign to support his interpretation. In v. 16 it states, “and you have not withheld your son, your only son,” without adding the words “from me,” because God himself speaks in this verse, while in the words said by the angel of his accord the phrase “from me” is used — “because here (in v. 16) the angel spoke to him in the name of God, therefore it was not ‘from me,’ because God knew beforehand as to Abraham’s righteousness, and he did not need this test.”

Throughout his commentaries, R. Judah he-Hasid attempts to see things in a broad, all-encompassing way, as they relate to their entire context. This comes out clearly when we examine his approach in commenting on an entire unit. For example, in the blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49) he utilizes a comparative method with the aim of understanding all of the elements of the text, so that when he discovers a difference between different components he calls attention to them. Thus, he stresses the distinction between those blessings said in the second person and those formulated in the third person. In addition, he compares the internal components with the actual status of the various tribes as portrayed in the Book of Joshua. On the basis of this comparison, he reaches conclusions as to the similarities and differences between the blessing of Jacob and the picture which emerges from other sources.

In this article, I have attempted to present a new picture of the Biblical exegete R. Judah he-Hasid. The limited format is insufficient to present the entire picture, but it is my hope that the points raised, together with the examples which I have quoted from different sections of R. Judah’s commentary, have presented the image of an innovative commentator, among the outstanding exegetes of the Middle Ages.