FROM TRADITION TO CRITICISM: JEWISH SOURCES AS AN AID TO THE CRITICAL STUDY OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

by

ALEXANDER ROFÉ

Jerusalem

The book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible opens with a poem which extols the virtue of the man who “delights in the Torah of the Lord and recites his Torah day and night”: bêtôrat yhwh ĥepsô ûbêtôratô yehgeh yômâm wâlâylâ (Ps. i 2). The same practice is enjoined to Joshua in an interpolation extant in the first chapter of the canonical collection of Prophets (Josh. i 8): “Let not this book of the Torah cease from your lips, but recite it day and night”: lô'-yâmûš sêper hattôrâ hazzeh mippîkâ wêhâgîtâ bô yômâm wâlâylâ. It appears yet again as a promise interpolated in Isa. lix 21. Here, those in Jacob who turned back from sin have a covenant bestowed on them, the contents of which is that the Lord’s words—here meaning his commandments—will never cease from their lips, etc.: îdêhâray ‘âšer-šamî bêpîkâ lô'-yâmûšû mippîkâ. The presence of this ideal of assiduous study of the Torah—an ideal phrased in similar expressions—at three crucial points of the biblical canon, indicates that the last phases of the formation of the Hebrew Bible must be considered as Proto-Pharisaic.1 Or, in other words, the emerging Judaism of late Persian and early Hellenistic times is responsible for the authorship of the most recent layers in the creation of the Hebrew Bible.

This perception can be put to use in biblical criticism. When our textual witnesses are at variance, sometimes the fact should not be explained as due to mechanical mistakes made by the copyists, but rather to the intrusion of midrashic elements into biblical manuscripts. The same criterion is applicable in the field of higher criticism. In those passages where the critic suspects the interference of a late hand,

he is advised to check whether the suggested interpolation shows marks of the lore and law that developed in Second Commonwealth Judaism. And in case of a positive answer, his historico-literary arguments will find a reliable confirmation. All in all, the task of discerning primary and secondary elements in the Biblical books, ancient and late components therein, can be assisted by the recognition of the specific character of Jewish creativity in late-biblical and early post-biblical times.

At least four types of Jewish elaborations can be detected in the Hebrew Bible: literary, theological, legal and legalistic. They are present in many of the books, but especially obtain in the Torah and in the Former Prophets. The task of gathering and studying them all is certainly a rewarding one. In the frame of the present paper, however, I shall limit myself to one segment only: literary elaborations of aggadic nature which were introduced into the Hebrew Bible by Jewish scribes.

One of the trends that have been pointed out in Jewish Aggadah is the spurious identification of two biblical heroes who share the same name or the same patronym. A well-known instance of this course is the identification of Obadiah the steward of the palace of King Ahab (mid-4th century BCE), mentioned in 1 Kings xviii, with the prophet Obadiah who prophesied against Edom after the fall of Jerusalem (1st half of the 6th century BCE), nearly three hundred years later.

The identification is made in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 39b as follows:

"The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom" (the book of Obadiah, vs. 1). Why particularly Obadiah against Edom? R. Isaac said: The Holy One blessed be He, said: Let Obadiah, who has lived with two wicked persons [i.e., Ahab and Jezebel] and yet has not taken example from their deeds, come and prophesy against wicked Esau [i.e. Edom] who lived with two righteous persons [i.e., Isaac and Rebekah] and yet did not learn from their deeds.

---


3 With the term 'aggadā, from which the adjective "aggadic" is derived, I designate the Jewish literary, mostly legendary, material embedded in the Talmudim and Midrashim.