R. RAPHAEL BERDUGO’S METHOD OF RECONCILING CONTRADICTIONS IN THE BIBLE

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Rabbi Raphael Berdugo (Meknes, Morocco, 1747–1821) was one of the most important Moroccan rabbis of recent centuries. His broad scholarly production includes commentaries on the Bible, sermons, Torah novellae, and a volume of responsa. These writings have been the subject of several studies of late, which have examined the nature of his Bible commentary, his philosophical principles, and the hallmarks of his halakhic works. Here I want to build on this scholarly endeavor and focus on his *Mesammehei Lev*, a running commentary on the Bible that is actually the third part of his *Mei Menuhot*. Focusing on his commentary to the Former Prophets, my goal is to trace the principles that guided Berdugo when he had to resolve various ostensibly contradictions and inconsistencies in the biblical text.

Many biblical passages are inconsistent and even incompatible with other passages in the same or other books. Such contradictions and
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inconsistencies are found in individual stories, cycles, and books; but they are most conspicuous where the same material is presented in two parallel versions, such as Leviticus vis-à-vis Ezekiel, Deuteronomy vis-à-vis Exodus and Numbers, the variant texts of David’s hymn in 2 Samuel and Psalms, Samuel and Kings vis-à-vis Chronicles, the account of Hezekiah in Kings and Isaiah, and the story of the destruction of the Temple and exile to Babylonia in Kings and Jeremiah. The discrepancies fall into diverse categories: chronological problems, inconsistency in details, textual variants, omissions and additions, etc.

The talmudic sages were aware of contradictions in Scripture, as reflected in statements like “two texts that are mutually contradictory,” “one text says X and another says Y,” “two opposing and mutually contradictory texts.” The sages had various ways to reconcile these ostensible contradictions: finding a third text that agrees with one of the contradictory ones and resolving the issue by weight of numbers, relating each text to a different situation, or harmonizing the two texts. Similarly, in the long tradition of biblical exegesis we find diverse motives for reconciling such contradictions: apologetic (in the tradition of “know how to answer the freethinker”), polemic (like Saadiah Ga’on vs. Hiwi al-Balkhi and the opposition to the Muslim philosopher Ibn Hazm), or strictly exegetical.

Here I analyze several sets of incompatible biblical passages and examine how Berdugo reconciles them. I pay special attention to several questions: Does Berdugo incline toward a solution offered by the talmudic sages and medieval commentators, or does he prefer a new one of his own? Does he favor the plain meaning or peshat or use a homiletic approach (derash)? Are his motives polemical or strictly exegetical?

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see M. Perez, “Methods of Settling Contradictory and Inconsistent Biblical Passages in R. Jehuda ibn Ba’al’m’s Commentaries,” in Milet 2 (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 253–74 (Heb.).

5 The *baraita* of Ishmael at the beginning of the Sifra, ed. Weiss, p. 1a.

