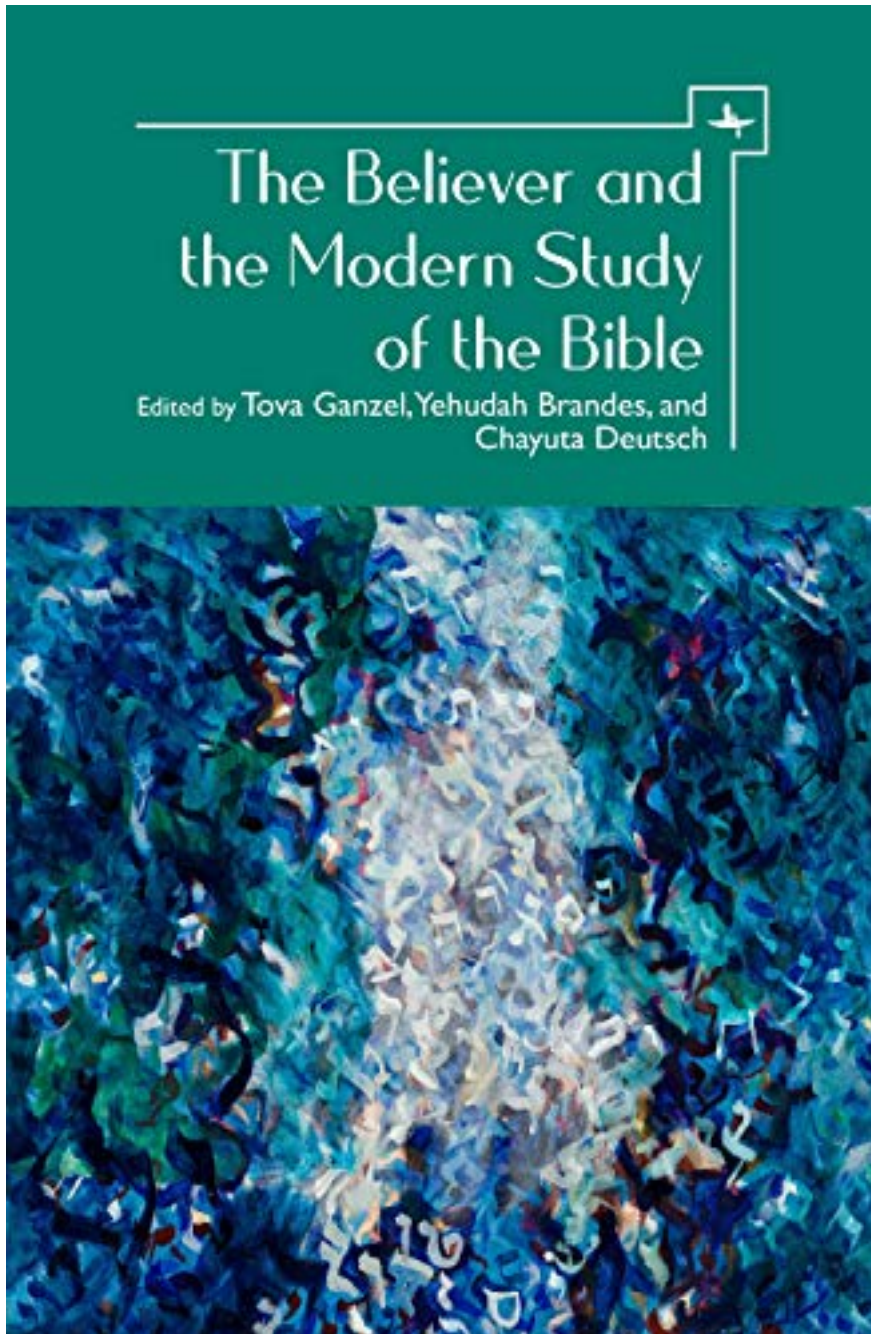


The Believer and the Modern Study of the Bible

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The present volume is an English translation of *Be-'ene 'Elohim Ve-'adam*, originally published in Hebrew by Beit Morasha of Jerusalem in 2015.^[1] The book originated in a seminar on the relationship between Orthodox Jewish belief and modern critical study of the Bible, which took place in 2009-10, in which the editors were principal participants.^[2] The problem with which the seminar and the book wished to grapple was that despite the fact that “sources that reflect critical

thinking on the composition of the biblical corpus can already be found in classical rabbinic and medieval Jewish literature,... these early articulations were not sufficient to challenge the basic traditional assumptions about biblical books, their origins, composition, and transmission. The appearance of critical biblical scholarship in the eighteenth century stunned religious readers of the Bible.... Confronted with the cogency of biblical scholarship and cognizant of the challenges that this research entailed for them, those who believed in the divine origin of the Bible were forced to respond" (p. vii). The intention of the editors of the volume was to present the reader with a wide range of "possible ways to reduce the tension between, on the one hand, belief in the sanctity of the Torah and the consequent obligation to observe the commandments, and, on the other, the intellectual obligation to impartial analysis, which is also a religious imperative. The purpose of these articles is not to engage in biblical criticism as such or to examine the conclusions of biblical research, but rather to define the meaning of belief in 'Torah from heaven'" (p. xi). In other words, this volume is meant to help traditional Jewish readers find ways to legitimize, or perhaps to conciliate, the (partial?) acceptance of modern critical study of the Bible, while not sacrificing the demands of Orthodox beliefs.

This is an issue that is familiar to anyone who engages in the teaching and study of the Bible within a largely Orthodox or even traditional setting, be it in the synagogue; in religious schools (in Israel, this includes the official state-religious school system, in which a certain measure of rabbinic supervision over such subjects as Bible and Talmud is a matter of course); in adult education; and even in academic settings, in which professors grapple with the best ways to engage students who come from religious backgrounds with critical academic research, without offending their beliefs. In fact, many of those professors, some of the authors represented in this volume included, have had to grapple with the same questions themselves.[\[3\]](#)

In a recent article, Adam S. Ferziger compared the ways North American and Israeli modern Orthodox thinkers have come to deal with this issue, in fact citing the Hebrew edition of this volume, as well as the American-based website thetorah.com.[\[4\]](#) By and large, this volume represents the Israeli side of this effort. Of the twenty-one contributors, only two, Marc Zvi Brettler and Benjamin Sommer, hold faculty positions in American institutions. All of the rest are based in Israel, although several have received at least part of their education in the United States.[\[5\]](#)

The volume includes two main sections. The first is a 190-page-long "annotated anthology" titled "Wisdom and Knowledge Will Be Given to You," edited by Yoshi Fargeon. Its purpose, in my understanding, is to serve as a sort of "sourcebook" for readers who wish to find justification for the various approaches presented in the essays that comprise the second part of the book. This it does by taking quotations from various rabbinic sources, from the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the various *midrashim*, through such medieval commentators and thinkers as Rashi and Pseudo-Rashi, Rashbam, Abravanel, Kimhi, Maimonides, and Nachmanides, to early modern Hasidic masters, Rabbi M. M. Kasher, Rabbi Joseph Kara, and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. As Fargeon admits, "this anthology neither offers nor presumes to offer a complete and balanced picture of the views put forth in rabbinic literature on these subjects from the time of the sages until the recent past," the items quoted are often taken out of their original contexts, and they do not always express the most-accepted view (p. 1). Nonetheless, Fargeon, and presumably the editors of the volume, thought that having such a collection of sources was important enough to devote nearly 20 percent of the volume to it.

The anthology is divided into four main sections, which correspond to the major issues that are discussed in the essays that follow. In Fargeon's words: "The first two sections, on the origins of the Torah and of the books of the Prophets and Writings, correspond to the field known as higher, or literary-historical, criticism. The third section, on the evolution of the text of the Torah, is in dialogue with the field of lower, or textual, criticism. The fourth section discusses the relationship between Scripture and ancient literature, and corresponds to biblical scholarship pursued against the background of the literature of the ancient Near East" (p. 1). Each major section is then

subdivided into more specific headings. For example, the first section includes “Scrolls from the Torah that Predated Moses,” “Moses’ Role in the Composition of the Torah,” and “Changes Made in the Torah after Moses’ Days” (such as the addition of the description of Moses’s death at the end of Deuteronomy, the addition of Balaam’s prophecy, and more). For each of these, Fargeon brings a variety of excerpts in chronological order: Talmudic, midrashic, medieval, and modern. These are followed by endnotes (instead of footnotes as in the Hebrew version), which include biographical and historical information on the various sources, which are an important aid to understanding their historical context. And so the first three sections are designed to make the reader aware of rabbinic opinions that are in conflict, at least to some measure, with the idea that the entire Torah, exactly as we now have it, was given to Moses at Sinai, and that the rest of the Tanakh was collected as is by the men of the Great Assembly. One interesting deficiency in this section is the lack of any reference to rabbinic attitudes toward the Septuagint, which is so central to modern textual criticism. The final section of the anthology deals with “scripture and ancient literature,” in which Fargeon asks “Can the texts of the ancient Near East—a body of typically pagan works—play a role in Torah scholarship?” (p. 146). In this case, while Fargeon does cite a number of Talmudic and medieval sources that answer this question positively, most of his sources are from the twentieth century—written after the vast body of ancient Near Eastern literature was rediscovered and deciphered. What Fargeon does not ask here is what to do when ancient sources seem to contradict the basic historical “facts” that are stated by scripture, such as when the Tel Dan stele states that Kings Joram and Ahaziah were killed by an Aramean king (perhaps Hazael), while 2 Kings 9 claims that they were both killed by the rebel Jehu. In general, this part of the anthology seems to be rather outdated, citing early twentieth-century reactions to an ever-expanding field of research. The fact that absolutely no reactions to the huge contradictions between the ever-expanding archaeological record and much of scripture are even mentioned in the anthology is also, in my opinion, a major deficiency. This deficiency is only partially made up for in some of the essays that follow.

The remainder of the volume includes twenty essays, also arranged in four sections: “General Overview,” “The Revelation at Sinai and Its Interpretation,” “Ethical Challenges,” and “The Bible in Its Historical Context.” The individual essays within each section are arranged in what in the Hebrew was the alphabetical order of the authors’ names—in the English this is less obvious, especially since the sections are not marked out in the text itself. The essays are of varying topics and styles—from academic treatments of specific issues to personal reflections on the issues at hand. The result is a very heterogeneous volume.

The first essay, “A Personal Perspective on Biblical History, the Authorship of the Torah, and Belief in Its Divine Origin” by Shawn Zelig Aster, a professor of biblical history at Bar-Ilan University, is just such a “personal reflection,” which grew out of years of teaching at Yeshiva University and then at Bar-Ilan and answering students’ questions about what they perceived as “a direct conflict between faith and science”—a perception that Aster claims is a false one. This he does by showing that in many (but not all) cases in which such a conflict seems to arise, it is possible to read the biblical text and the archaeological evidence (he uses the destruction of Canaanite Hazor as attested in the archaeological record and in the Bible as a test case) in ways that minimize the conflict, and by stating that the Bible is not about history at all but about faith, and that it demands “a leap of faith,” which he hopes that all have the courage to take.

In “The Sages as Bible Critics,” Yehuda Brandes, a rabbi who was head of Jerusalem’s Beit Morasha, which hosted the seminar and published the Hebrew volume, and is now head of Herzog Academic College, argues that the sages and many of the medieval commentators practiced a sort of critical reading of the Bible that is very similar to both “lower” and “higher” modern criticism—“the traditional Hebrew term for biblical criticism is ‘midrash.’” In his opinion, “There is no fundamental difference between the sages and critical Bible scholars in their approach to asking questions, an approach that contrasts with the fear of heretical inquiry characteristic of the ‘faith-based’ or *haredi* approach to Bible study” (p. 209).

To a certain extent, “The Tanakh as History” by Marc Zvi Brettler, formerly professor of Bible at Brandeis University and now at Duke, takes a different path to a similar conclusion. Brettler, who has published widely on similar issues, considers the literal, historical reading of the Bible to be a “Protestant” reading, which has influenced present-day American Orthodoxy.^[6] Judaism, in his view, has traditionally recognized that many parts of the Bible were not meant to be read literally and has also been willing to accept current scientific theories on the physical world, even if they seemed to be in conflict with a literal reading of the Bible.

In “Kabbalah as a Shield against the ‘Scourge’ of Biblical Criticism: A Comparative Analysis of the Torah Commentaries of Elia Benamozegh and Mordecai Breuer,” Adiel Cohen, a rabbi who teaches at a number of religious and secular colleges of education and other institutions, analyzes the work of these two twentieth-century rabbis, both of whom integrated contemporary critical approaches with a kabbalah-based reading of the Bible, resulting in what he calls “the dialectic-mystical approach.” According to Cohen, while both Benamozegh and Breuer were misunderstood and marginalized by their contemporaries, “Their approaches reflect growth, empowerment, and a broadening of the accepted religious outlook. The intensity of both scholars’ religious zeal was equaled only by their integrity, and by their willingness to take an honest look at the subject and accept the truth without prejudice—even if that truth was found on foreign ground, far from the pastures of Jewish tradition.... We are not called upon to venerate, or even to accept, their commentaries as they are, but we are obligated take a keen interest in their work because their ideas stimulate discussion and thought, and enhance and inspire faith” (p. 258).

The essay by Tamar Ross, professor emerita of Jewish philosophy at Bar-Ilan, “Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Biblical Criticism: Some Reflections on the Importance of Asking the Right Question,” begins by stating that critical approaches to the biblical text stand in opposition to Maimonides’s eighth principle of faith and that “the scope and intensity of such questions have deepened considerably in the past century.” She begins with a short survey of non-Orthodox approaches (Mordecai Kaplan, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Joshua Heschel, Louis Jacobs) and then turns to “Orthodox solutions thus far” (p. 265)—the modernist “*Torah u-madda*” approach and the more radical approaches of Mordechai Breuer, David Weiss Halivni, Joseph Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, James Kugel, and Norman Solomon. Ultimately, Ross considers all of these approaches as insufficient to meet the challenges and calls for a radical new “first order theology.”^[7]

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, who heads a “hesder” yeshiva and has written widely on ethics in rabbinic thought, reproduces a response that he wrote to a religious student who found himself exposed to biblical criticism in his university studies (“Ask the Rabbi: ‘Biblical Criticism Is Destroying my Religious Faith!’”). Cherlow lists the drawbacks of the common Orthodox approach of simply ignoring modern criticism and recommends that the student follow the lead of Breuer, Kook, and others, in taking the knowledge and insights offered by modern research, while not losing sight of the sanctity of God’s Torah.

The essay by Rabbi David Bigman, “‘I Shall Fear God Alone and Not Show Favor in Torah’: A Conceptual Foundation for Wrestling with Biblical Scholarship,” demonstrates an approach that is similar to Cherlow’s; it is not quite clear why Cherlow’s essay is in the first section while Bigman’s is in the second. Specifically, he aims to show that Maimonides’s insistence that every word of the Torah must have been dictated by God to Moses is not the only possible view within Orthodoxy. He concludes that modern scholarship is a useful interpretive tool for Torah study, but “we must not forget that these tools cannot judge the revelation of our holy Torah. Science is a technical tool; it does not have the capacity to determine the value and meaning of the things it investigates” (p. 317).

In “Revelation and Religious Authority in the Sinai Traditions,” Benjamin D. Sommer, professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, continues in dialogue with Rosenzweig and

Heschel, focusing on the ambiguities that exist in the description of the Sinai/Horeb revelation in Exodus 20. After comparing that chapter with other passages that also describe the giving of the Torah, he proposes to define even the written Torah as “oral Torah” or “misdrash,” which is a result of the way the revelation was understood by its human authors. This, to him, was the beginning of a continuous process of development of the Torah, one that continues to this day. He warns, however, against the rewriting of the texts themselves. They should be added to, not rewritten.

In his essay, “The Torah Speaks to People,” Chezi Cohen, a Bible instructor at Yeshivat Ma’aleh Gilboa, argues against mystically orientated exegesis, including Breuer’s “aspects theory,” in favor of the dictum that “the Torah spoke in human language,” meaning that the Torah must be understood within the realm of human logic. “Thus, although God’s power and might fill the world, in His encounter with limited mortals God constricts Himself and accepts the rules of this world” (p. 342). “While God is infinite, the Torah is limited.... A person speaking with a small child must limit himself to the child’s vocabulary” (p. 343).

Avraham Shammah also uses the Sinai revelation as his point of origin (“The Revelation Narratives: Analyses and Theological Reflections on Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Classical Midrash”). He shows how the visual revelation of the Exodus version, in which the people “saw” the sounds/voices of God, changed to an oral one in Deuteronomy and how this difference was understood within rabbinic exegesis.

The third group of essays deals with ethical issues in the Bible. In “The Binding of Isaac and Historical Contextuality,” Chayuta Deutsch examines various approaches to the ethical questions posed by the story of the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham at God’s command (Genesis 22), known in Jewish tradition as the *Akedah*: How could God command such an act? How could Abraham be willing to commit such an act? And why has this act attained such a central place within Jewish tradition, from antiquity to modern Israel? After a survey of various (mostly modern) views, Deutsch suggests what she presents as “understanding Abraham’s position in light of his contemporary cultural background”—in “an ancient agricultural culture that revolved around the fruit of the land, the commandment of the *Akedah* fits along the spectrum of difficult, but bearable, commandments in which man is required to offer to God the most precious fruit of his labors, as tithes and tenth-parts, first shearings, first fruits, and firstborn animals” (pp. 390, 391). God’s secondary command *not* to kill Isaac actually sets limits and defines human life as being beyond an acceptable sacrifice.

The essay by Bar-Ilan Talmud professor Hananel Mack, “Manasseh, King of Judah, in Early Rabbinic Literature: An Erudite, Unfettered, and Creative Biblical Critic,” does not really deal with an ethical issue but instead shows how several rabbinic sources present King Manasseh, a great sinner according to 2 Kings 21 and a repentant according to 2 Chronicles 33, as an exegete who interpreted various biblical passages in what Mack considers to be an early example of Bible criticism, putting him on par with some of the great rabbis of the Talmud.

The essay by Amit Kula, a practicing community rabbi who also teaches Jewish philosophy at Ben-Gurion University and at other institutions, “Justification, Denial, and ‘Terraforming’: Three Theological-Exegetical Models,” is really about the question of theodicy, although Kula never actually uses the term. Beginning with Job, then turning to “the rebellious son” of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and finally to the idea of Esther’s having been given over to a Gentile king in order to save her people, Kula presents three different approaches to what seems to be an inherent ethical dilemma in each of the cases: “justification,” meaning finding a way the dilemma can be solved (the rebellious son is destined to be a murderer, so best execute him while young); “denial,” rejecting the possibility of understanding God’s reasoning and simply submitting to divine will; and finally what Kula calls “terraforming,” a term that he consciously borrows from science fiction, here meaning “taking the celestial Torah, with its infinite range of meaning, and giving it a concrete

worldly meaning: bringing the Torah from heaven to earth” (pp. 415-6). In the case of the rebellious son, the example cited by Kula is the explanation given in Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 71a: “Rabbi Simeon said: ‘Because he ate a *tartemar* of meat and drank half a log of Italian wine, his parents bring him to be executed? There never was such a case and there never will be. If so, why was it written? Interpret it and be rewarded” (p. 418). While Kula’s point is well taken, his use of the English term “terraforming” seems out of place.[\[8\]](#)

The fourth and final section is composed of seven essays “that discuss the significance and challenges of examining the Bible in its historical and cultural context,” in other words, contributions whose specific topics do not fit any of the previous three sections (p. xiii). In a way, these are the most “academic” pieces in the book. The contribution of Yoel Elitzur of the Hebrew University School of Education, an expert on biblical geography and linguistics, is “The Names of God and the Dating of the Biblical Corpus.” Building on the work of Avi Hurvitz, who attempted to use linguistic data to counter the late dating of various biblical texts that is preferred by many modern scholars, Elitzur shows that the occurrence of the forms “[E]-[Shaddai],” “YWHW *Tvza’ot*,” “Adonai,” and the theophoric component YHW in personal names can be traced as historical-linguistic phenomena through the books of the Bible, only if one assumes that the books actually represent the linguistic strata of the periods in which they are set, rather than that of a theoretical late composition. This essay has the potential of being a real contribution to the question of the dating of biblical texts. It is unfortunate that it is presented as a polemic against the documentary hypothesis.

“Discrepancies between Laws in the Torah” by Bar-Ilan Bible professor Joshua Berman is another polemic against the documentary hypothesis, although Berman never actually uses the term. He begins with the obvious discrepancy between the law of the firstborn animal in Numbers 18:14-18, in which the animal is to be given to the priests, and in Deuteronomy 15:19-23, in which it is to be eaten by an Israelite. Berman rejects both the Talmudic harmonization and the modern critical approach that sees the two as belonging to originally different collections of law (H or P and D), and then launches into what he sees as the basic reality underlying all ancient Near Eastern law: the use of “common law,” with judges adjudicating in accordance to custom and common sense, rather than “statutory law.” Ancient Near Eastern “law codes,” including the famous “Code of Hammurabi,” “are anthologies of *judgments*—snapshots of decisions rendered by judges, or perhaps even by the king himself” (p. 453). And so, in Berman’s view, is biblical law as well: Numbers 18:14-18 was an on-the-spot ruling that pertained to a specific situation (the aftermath of Korah’s rebellion), while Deuteronomy 15:19-23 was the rule that applied in normal circumstances. In my opinion, the weakness of Berman’s argument is in his failure to account for the literary context of the biblical laws—for the most part, they are presented as having been given to Moses for Israel to obey in perpetuity.

In her “Between the Prophet and His Prophecy: Ezekiel’s Visionary Temple in Its Historical Context,” Bar-Ilan Bible scholar Tova Ganzel, until recently the head of that university’s Midrasha (program for women’s advanced Torah study) and one of the editors of this volume, uses Ezekiel’s prophecy of the future temple (Ezekiel 40-48) as an example of how prophecies are shaped not only by their timeless divine messages but also by the personalities and real-life situations of the prophets themselves. Ezekiel, living in Babylon, was obviously influenced by both physical and administrative aspects of neo-Babylonian temples and described a future temple that included many of these aspects. Ganzel then demonstrates how rabbinic literature, from the Mishnah’s tractate *Middot* through Maimonides, attempted to cope with the fact that Ezekiel’s vision conformed with neither the first temple nor the second. This essay is important in that it clarifies the need to recognize that prophets are not only divine messengers but also products of their own time and place.

Rabbi Avia Hachohen of Yeshivat Tekoa takes the idea of a prophet being a product of his time and place all the way to Moses, but does so not by his own analysis but by that of a nineteenth-century

predecessor in “The Torah of Moses and the Laws of the Nations: A Study in the Teachings of Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin.” Rabbi Tzadok, in a sermon on the story of Jethro in Exodus 18, explained that Moses included laws that he learned from the Midianites, Egyptians, and others in the Torah—without any negation of the Torah’s divine origin. Hachohen wonders inconclusively if Rabbi Tzadok could have been influenced by the then-recent discoveries of ancient Near Eastern literature (the Code of Hammurabi was published only after his death), but even if not, “his words (which would thus fall into the category of prophecy and divine inspiration) nonetheless contain a systematic philosophical methodology for addressing this issue.” “The fundamental difference between the academic scholars of Judaism of his generation and Rabbi Tzadok was his belief in the holiness of each letter in both the written and the oral Torah” (p. 489). In Hachohen’s view, precedents for Rabbi Tzadok’s views can be found in Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed* (Hachohen does not deal with the apparent contradiction between this and Maimonides’s eighth principle of faith, which is discussed in other essays in this volume), and is also reflected in the writings of Rabbi Kook.

“Illuminating Inscriptions” by Rabbi Yaakov Medan, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion, begins by rejecting the position of Rabbi Tzvi Israel Tau of Yeshivat Har Hamor, a rival of Medan and his school in more ways than one, according to which no external sources should ever be used to aid the study of Torah. Medan discusses three cases in which evidence from inscriptions can and should be used to elucidate and to fill in gaps in the biblical texts: “The Status of Shechem and Its Environs at the Time of Joshua’s Conquest of Canaan” as elucidated by the Amarna letters, “The Power of Ahab’s Army” as can be seen from the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III of Assyria, and “The War of Jehoshaphat and Jehoram against Mesha, King of Moab” as illuminated by the Mesha stele. While any academic scholar of biblical history would agree in principle with Medan’s approach, his use of both the biblical texts and of the inscriptions themselves is so uncritical as to make the entire essay almost meaningless. For example, while he is aware that most scholars today deny any connection between the “Apiru” or “Habiru” mentioned in the Amarna letters and the later “Hebrews” or Israelites (whom he calls “Jews”—a blatant anachronism), he continues to make this connection because it serves his purpose. He also ignores cases of inscriptions providing information that is diametrically opposed to what the Bible says. His answers to those problems would be illuminating.

These questions are addressed by Haggai Misgav, a paleographer who teaches at several institutions, in “Archaeology and the Bible.” Misgav surveys the development of “biblical archaeology” and then turns to cases in which archaeology and inscriptions actually disagree with the biblical texts, using the Tel Dan stele as an example. Like Medan, Misgav is also a graduate of the Har Etzion yeshiva, and like Medan, Misgav believes that to study the Bible without recourse to archaeology and inscriptions is to study the Bible inadequately. It is interesting to see how these two products of the same school, and who share many of the same views but who have taken different career paths (one as a rabbi and the other as an academic), have developed different nuances when dealing with the same subjects. I do think that Medan would agree with the quote from Ibn Ezra’s Torah commentary with which Misgav closes his essay: “Common sense is the fundamental principle. The Torah was not intended for someone lacking reason. Intellect is the angel that mediates between man and his God” (p. 529).

The final essay in the book is “The Book of Daniel and the Twenty-First-Century Religious Bible Student” by Rivka Raviv, who teaches Bible and Midrash in Bar-Ilan’s Midrasha and at other institutions. At first glance, this is a strange topic for this volume, as in traditional Jewish milieus the book of Daniel is probably one of the least-studied books of the Bible. Unlike its prominent position in Christianity, in Judaism Daniel is not considered to have been a prophet, and the book itself is placed within the writings, the least “authoritative” of the sections of the Jewish Bible. But at closer reading, Raviv’s essay encapsulates many of the themes discussed in the previous sections of this volume: composition history, place in the canon, chronological and historical accuracy, and the reasons why any of this matters to the modern religious reader. Despite the fact that its position at

the end of the volume is a result of alphabetical ordering, it is indeed a fitting ending to the entire collection. The editors themselves do not offer any sort of postscript or summary, although the English edition does have indices of sources and of names, which the Hebrew does not.

Taken all together, this is a massive and varied collection that attempts to deal with one of the basic issues that lies on the interface between the traditional Jewish believer and the modern world: that of modern critical study of the Bible. As could be expected, the essays are of varying type and quality, especially when examined from the point of view of academic scholarship. This can be seen in their endnotes (which replace the footnotes in the Hebrew original, in my opinion making their reading less convenient): some cite varied academic sources, some cite only Hebrew-language sources, some cite primarily rabbinic sources, and some cite almost no sources at all. A few of the essays make real contributions to the field of biblical studies, others are important essays in modern Jewish thought, while some simply go over well-trodden paths.

So does this volume serve its purpose, as defined by the editors and as repeated at the beginning of this review? Partially, it does, in many different ways. This is probably the only place in which a reader will be able to find such academics as Brettler and Mack side by side with such rabbis as Cherlow and Medan. Many readers who come from faith-based backgrounds and who are searching for “justification” to engage in modern critical Bible study will find at least some of that “justification” within the pages of this book. The anthology and the essays in this book will make their lives somewhat easier. Others may have already found their own paths. But I very much doubt if any of Rabbi Tau’s students, not to mention members of the *Haredi* community, will be impressed by the selective and somewhat apologetic quotes from Abrabanel, Nachmanides, Breuer, or Kook. What this volume does do is to put the issues in focus and to elucidate at least one side of the argument. I would hope that this will be just the beginning of an ongoing conversation within contemporary Jewish scholarship about the modern study of the Bible.
