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Reading Morality Out of the Bible

James Kugel's book *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* contrasts ancient Jewish and Christian Bible commentators, who viewed the Bible as a divine work espousing ethical and religious guidance, with modern scholars who present the Bible as a human product consisting of etiological tales whose authors are motivated by a political agenda. Although Kugel admires the classic approach, he holds that modern scholars convey historical truth. This essay argues that the scholarly approach, as presented by Kugel, suffers from excessive moral cynicism and inconclusive evidence. The modern Biblical scholars assume ignoble motivations for biblical characters and biblical authors without justification. Despite Kugel's claims, the Bible does bear a moral message.

Those of a conservative bent sometimes cling to traditional positions with unreasonable tenacity, refusing to admit any difficulties with previously accepted opinions. This proclivity distorts analysis as does an opposing tendency. Individuals inclined toward the slaying of sacred cows relish opportunities to undermine religious and moral ideas and texts cherished over the course of human history. Obligatory cynicism stirs in response to any expression of reverence or sanctity. The compulsive need to debunk warps scholarship just as much as a refusal to challenge.

A good example of excessive cynicism emerges from James Kugel's depiction of modern biblical scholarship in his *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*. Kugel presents a consistent contrast between ancient interpreters of the Bible and modern scholars. Jewish and Christian commentators from roughly 300 BCE to 200 CE viewed the Bible as a divine work espousing ethical and religious guidelines for living a holy life. Contemporary Bible professors view it as human work whose original authors intended to compose etiological tales or advance a political agenda. According to Kugel, each approach has its advantages. Modern scholars convey historical truth, whereas the ancient interpreters both prioritize ethics and expound on the Bible as it has been understood by humanity for the last two millennia.

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Though Kugel voices some doubts about the conclusions of modern scholarship (p. 162), the thrust of this book affirms the veracity of its theories. An early passage sets the tone:

On the one hand, the ancient interpreters' way is crucial for what many people still wish to believe about the Bible and its message. On the other hand, the way of modern scholars, which seems to make good scientific sense, has undermined a great deal of what those ancient interpreters said (xiii).

Note the contrast between what people "wish to believe" and "good scientific sense." The notion that modern theories rest upon solid evidence continues throughout the work. Kugel writes of "the gap between what we now know about the Bible and what ancient interpreters thought" (117), mentions "the truth that moderns scholars present" (457), says that "modern scholars' explanations have proven very persuasive" (667), and repeatedly employs the phrase "now that we know" when describing their theories (472, 517). According to Kugel, the ancient interpreters fundamentally misunderstood the original intent of the Bible.

That is to say, the very idea that one should approach the Bible as a great book of divine instruction, and that the purpose of these stories in Genesis is therefore somehow to impart moral lessons or to provide ethical models for readers to imitate, is a creation of the ancient interpreters. This is not an idea that can be located in the book of Genesis itself... (79).

According to Kugel's presentation, modern biblical scholars seem tirelessly dedicated towards neutralizing any possible moral message in the scriptural canon. Cynical debunking and the hermeneutic of suspicion reign wild. In situations where biblical characters exhibit moral grandeur, the critics uncover a very different tale. According to the biblical account, Gideon exhibits impressive humility when he turns down the possibility of kingship. For the critics, this reflects putting the best face on an inability to unify rival tribes and establish a dynasty (390). When King David laments the death of Saul and expresses outrage at the killing of Abner, the critics see phony remorse intended to obscure the monarch's involvement in the wiping out of his enemies (484). The book of Ruth extols the virtues of benevolence and compassion; scholars explain that this book was written to justify intermarriage (403).

Two important aspects of Kugel's analysis deserve attention. Since no compelling literary evidence forces us to adopt the critical position in any

of the above examples, it remains very unclear why we should accept their reconstructions as historical truth. Yet, as noted above, the volume assumes that the modern professors correctly ascertain the original history. Secondly, the academic approach appears heavily biased away from moral grandeur in favor of ethical pettiness.

Let us explore an example in which the scholars might have their strongest case. Gideon names a son "Abimelech" (my father is king) and takes many wives and a concubine; behavior that is associated with a monarch. Arguably, this indicates that he truly wanted the kingship. On the other hand, "father" may refer to the Heavenly Father as in the name "Abiah." If so, Gideon named his child "God is king," which bolsters the idea that he eschewed the monarchy. Furthermore, even if we accept the evidence that Gideon desired a royal throne, it would not prove that his turning down the kingship was insincere. People have conflicting impulses and can also change their mind over time; perhaps Gideon was attracted to the monarchy and still managed to reject it when offered. Yet Kugel's scholars prefer readings which exclude any moral achievement.

Negation of moral motivation applies both to biblical characters and to biblical authors. From the scholarly perspective, every scriptural tale was truly penned for some self-serving purpose. A non-Aaronid priest out to get the Aaronids projected Jeroboam's golden calf episode back into the sojourn in the desert in order to portray Aaron in a negative light (315). Conversely, Korah did not participate in any rebellion; his mention reflects a later interpolation by an Aaronid writer attempting to discredit the opposition (334). To be fair, scholars raise an important point when they question why two brief references to this rebellion (Deuteronomy 11:6, Psalms 106:16-17) do not mention Korah, but that certainly does not suffice to establish their conclusion. Don Isaac Abarvanel and Rabbi Naftali Berlin offer cogent explanations for Korah's name not appearing in Deuteronomy. Even if we reject their answers, nothing here establishes that someone out to get a class of priests inserted Korah's name into the book of Numbers. Based on parallel assumptions about authorial motivation, Kugel's scholars assert that various chapters of the Joseph story stem from the descendents of Joseph, Reuben, or Judah trying to win points for their own group by making their ancestor the hero (182-185). A passage discussing D's profession captures this approach perfectly:

And what would D's profession have been. Scholars think it unlikely that he was a priest. After all, D's laws hardly served the interests of priests; some of their provisions appear even to have harmed the priesthood...He

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seems unlikely to have been an agent of the king – the king’s powers are limited by D’s code (309).

Notice the assumption running through the citation. Authors only write in order to enhance their own power and interests; petty power politics exhaust the potential motivations for putting quill to parchment. Applying this supposition to modern scholars would reduce their motivations for writing to the quest for money and fame or the attempt to ridicule rivals. Is it not possible that Kugel himself writes to educate, enlighten, and help those struggling to reconcile contemporary biblical scholarship and religious faith? If Kugel will allow himself elements of noble motivation, why can’t biblical authors receive the same consideration?

Let us return to the second theme, that of inconclusive evidence somehow proving critical conclusions. Kugel writes that the early conception of God did not view the deity as omniscient and brings proof from God asking Cain where Abel is. Yet when Cain evades the question, God knows precisely what happened to Abel, indicating omniscience. Kugel tries to neutralize this point by arguing that “It is only in the next sentence, when He presumably comes closer to Cain and hears “your brother’s blood crying out to Me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10) that God discovers the horrible truth (109). What makes this presumption more convincing than suggesting that God’s initial question was a challenge to Cain or an opportunity for Cain to confess, and not a request for information?

Kugel doubts that Jacob could have loved Joseph “because he was the son of his old age” as Genesis 37:3 says; after all, Benjamin was truly the youngest son. In fact, the entire episode of Joseph and his brothers reflects an adaptation of an older work of fiction (182). This argument reveals psychological insensitivity. Surely, a child can become entrenched in a certain role in the family and retain that role even when another child should in theory displace him. Rashbam, the medieval exegete, indeed explains that Joseph had already achieved the position of beloved youngest son and Benjamin’s subsequent birth did not alter that.

The next example combines unconvincing reading with more moral cynicism.

And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother (Genesis 29:10).

The verse states that Jacob saw both Rachel and her sheep; for Kugel’s scholars, this indicates that Jacob’s interest in marrying Rachel stemmed from a

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desire for financial gain. This reading resembles rabbinic *midrash* on an earlier verse in which Laban runs to greet Abraham's servant after he sees a ring and bracelet adorning his sister's hand (Genesis 24:30). Just as the rabbis attribute greed to Laban, Kugel applies it to Jacob (155). However, this exegesis ignores one crucial difference. The Jacob story lends itself to a perfectly reasonable alternative explanation for the text mentioning the sheep; it explains why Jacob rolls back the stone. Jacob wants to help Rachel but he will not roll the stone back for her unless she needs to access the well, hence the reference to seeing the sheep. As usual, the scholars according to Kugel favor an approach that reduces the moral stature of a biblical hero.

Refusal to find any moral greatness in Scripture also influences Kugel's response to cultural comparisons with the ancient Near East. While distinguished scholars such as Moshe Greenberg and Nahum Sarna have emphasized the moral chasm dividing the Pentateuch and Near Eastern parallels, Kugel dismisses such writing as apologetics. Thus the flood story resembles the Gilgamesh epic, revelation at Sinai mirrors suzerain treaties, biblical prophets resemble ancient oracles, and the legal code of Jewish law looks like the Code of Hammurabi. Yet colossal differences exist. In Mesopotamian versions of the flood story, the gods bring the deluge because humanity's noise irritates them, individual humans are saved arbitrarily and not because of righteousness, and the gods gather around a sacrifice like flies. The biblical account provides moral reasons for the deluge and the saving of Noah and the offerings provide a sweet smell; a far more refined and less corporeal image. Ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties did not include religious directives against adultery nor did they call upon a group to become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Biblical prophets reproach monarchs for moral and religious transgressions unlike hired oracles of the royal court. The similarities only highlight the immense gap between the biblical world and that of the rest of Mesopotamia. Oddly, Kugel explicitly mentions all these distinctions (pp. 76, 415-416, 441-442) yet refuses to see any moral superiority in the Bible and dismisses all such arguments as apologetics.

An appendix appearing on Kugel's website entitled "Apologetics and Biblical Criticism Light" (<http://jameskugel.com/apologetics.pdf>) expands his argument. There, Kugel notes morally questionable behavior of biblical heroes such as Abraham and Jacob to prove that the Bible conveys no special moral message. However, the Bible does not take a clear stand on some of these stories and our patriarchs may indeed have sinned. Nahmanides criticized Abraham's behavior in Egypt, and Rabbi David Kimhi found fault in Jacob buying Esau's birthright for a

pot of lentils. Alternatively, circumstances sometimes justify or mitigate behavior we would usually condemn. A more telling question asks which ideals the Bible vigorously promotes. God chooses Abraham because he will direct his descendants to do “justice and righteousness” (Genesis 18:19). The divine attributes are “merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto a thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:5). The concluding section certainly raises moral questions but the thrust of the entire passage makes it clear that God stands for compassion much more than vengeance. Another revealing question focuses on the essential themes of Jewish law. The numerous commandments dedicated to caring for widows, orphans, paupers, and strangers (e.g. Exodus 22:20-23:12, Leviticus 19:9-18, Deuteronomy 14:28-15:18) far outnumber obligations raising ethical difficulties such as the directive to eradicate Amalek. The presence of some hard questions should not obscure the Bible’s overarching moral message.

According to Kugel’s scholars, the original versions of biblical stories were intended to explain names and practices rather than convey moral and religious ideas. The sin in Eden explains how hunter-gatherers became farmers (55); the Cain and Abel story explains the vengeful practices of the Kenites (63-66); the Sodom episode accounts for the ruins of Sodom (129); the war with Amalek explains the name Rephidim (236). As mentioned, no compelling literary evidence forces us to accept these speculative reconstructions of motivation for the recording of events thousands of years ago. Let us investigate one illustrative example. Scholars infer from the usage of the term “*kol*” in the phrase “*kol horeg kayin*” (anyone who kills Cain), that this biblical account refers to a group – those who attack the Kenites – and not an individual, Cain’s murderer. However, Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, the Italian commentator, offers a more reasonable alternative: God speaks to all those thinking of murdering Cain. That explains the use of a term implying several people. Should we adopt Seforno’s reading or follow a scholarly position positing that the story truly relates to a people not mentioned once in this section of scripture? Why adopt unfounded conjecture as historical truth?

The scholarly reading of the Eden story stands on even weaker ground. Some anthropologists argue that the discovery of farming led to more time spent outside thereby increasing the need for clothing. In addition, the idea that planting seeds eventually bears fruit helped bring about a realization of the father’s role

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in producing offspring. The biblical narrative of Eden includes the need to toil in the field, the wearing of garments, and the connection between husband and wife (Genesis 2:24). Thus, this story's original purpose was to explain a major societal shift. However, several problems plague this theory. What evidence indicates that Adam was a hunter prior to this episode? Secondly, scholars assume the confluence of planting, clothing, and parenthood in the ancient world without conclusive support. Finally, the biblical account emphasizes increased difficulties in agriculture and in childbirth more than it speaks of a shift in the basic patterns of human behavior. It is certainly a stretch to speak of a well-established scholarly etiological reading of the sin in Eden.

If the modern scholars are correct, the Bible should never have achieved the prominence it has. As Kugel writes: "If it doesn't have that meaning for you anymore – if all it is is etiological tales and priestly polemics and political speeches – then why are you singing it?" (682). His question also leads in another direction. How did a text consisting of explanations for place names and political machinations ever become the book that provided moral and religious guidance for a significant percentage of people in the history of humanity? Did this happen to any other parallel work? Could interpretative ingenuity have accomplished the same feat for *The Traveler's Guide to Scotland* or an Agatha Christie novel? The idea that a work bereft of idealism became the book of books strains credulity; apparently, modern scholars do believe in miracles.

Kugel has made significant contributions to Bible study in the fields of biblical poetry and early biblical interpretation. His extensive knowledge and keen insight find expression in *How to Read the Bible*. Unfortunately, the book is far too quick to convert scholarly conjecture into established fact and is strongly biased in favor of moral cynicism regarding biblical themes, biblical characters, and biblical authors. In that regard, the ancient interpreters more accurately appreciated the authentic nature of the Bible.

