

## BOOK REVIEW

*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, Senior Editor David L. Lieber, New York: The Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001, 1560 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

The opening decade of the 21st century has seen the publication of three new Torah commentaries produced by, respectively, the Conservative and Reform movements in the United States. They are *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001); *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* (Union for Reform Judaism [URJ], 2006); and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (Union for Reform Judaism [URJ]/Women of Reform Judaism, 2008).

Each book brought its unique gifts. Taken together they make for a wealth of sources and resources for the interested reader.

All feature the text of the Pentateuch in Hebrew and correlated English translation, with a commentary in English. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* and *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* includes the traditional *haftarot* (additional prophetic readings for the synagogue liturgy) and commentaries upon them.

The editors of *Etz Hayim* worked closely with the Jewish Publication Society. The *peshat* [contextual meaning] commentary is based on the larger five volumes of the *JPS Torah Commentary*. This book, in condensed form, offers core insights from those works in the areas of archeology, philology, and anthropology, as well as a new awareness of ancient cultures. The interested reader can then go to the original JPS series to find a more detailed explanation.

On the three commentaries, Frederick E. Greenspahn explains:

*Etz Hayim* is by far the most explicitly denominational. There are frequent references to Conservative Jewish practice in its section on Jewish practice, which often cites the decisions of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Moreover, all the authors of the JPS series comments (namely Nahum M. Sarna, Ba-

*David J. Zucker, PhD is Rabbi/Chaplain at Shalom Park, a senior continuum of care center. His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005). He has published several articles in The Jewish Bible Quarterly, and he contributes to a variety of journals. His website is [www.davidjzucker.org](http://www.davidjzucker.org).*

ruch Levine, Jacob Milgrom, and Jeffrey Tigay), have some formal connection with the Conservative movement. Even its literary editor, novelist Chaim Potok, was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.<sup>1</sup>

While this volume as prepared "for use in synagogues affiliated with the Conservative movement (and thus conforming to Conservative Jewish liturgical practice), *Etz Hayim* is also fully deserving of an audience of biblical scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish alike."<sup>2</sup>

Greenspahn observes that the

most conspicuous feature of this volume is its presentation of three, ostensibly separate commentaries, printed one above the other on each page. These present a straightforward (*peshat*), a homiletical (*derash*), and a practical (*halakhah le-ma'aseh*) interpretation of the text . . . . These separate commentaries do not always agree with one another. . . . The underlying diversity is also a hallmark of the Conservative movement, whether it be viewed positively or negatively.<sup>3</sup>

The Introduction to *Etz Hayim* explains of the *peshat* commentary:

. . . while reverential, [it] is not apologetic. It does not attempt to justify all of the statements in the Torah or demonstrate that they conform to our view of scientific truth. Nor does it seek to rationalize institutions such as slavery or commands like the one to kill all of the Canaanites. Such passages are viewed as a reflection of the age in which they were composed, in need of being reinterpreted by later generations in light of the principles of equity, justice, and compassion that are central to the Torah (p. xix).

For its part, the newly compiled *derash*

. . . contains selected insights from more than 2000 years of Torah study. There are passages from the Talmud and Midrash, the teachings of the Sages in the first five centuries of the Common Era. There are insights of Rashi, the great French commentator of the 11th century. And there are homiletic and psychological insights by 19th century Hasidic teachers and by contemporary rabbis and thinkers (p. xx).

As noted earlier, the *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* consciously reflects Conservative Judaism's understanding of religious practice. What does this mean philosophically? The Editor explains that while Conservative Ju-

daism affirms the holiness of the Torah, it recognizes that "Jewish law developed over time and has been shaped by historical influences. Although Jewish law is strongly rooted in the Torah, Jewish practice in our day cannot be identified exclusively with what we read in the Torah." Consequently, integrated into the volume is

. . . an additional layer of commentary, *halakhah le-ma'aseh*, that addresses the question of how the Jewish community has responded to the words we read in the Torah . . . as applied to every aspect of daily life, including personal relations, business practices, religious observances, social policy, and acts of social conscience . . . as understood and practiced by modern Conservative Judaism (p. xx).

A further discussion of the role of *halakhah* (normative Jewish legal traditions) in Conservative Judaism appears in an essay later in the book, Elliot Dorff's "Medieval and Modern *Halakhah*."

The Conservative approach accepts the basic conclusions of modern academic biblical scholarship:

Conservative Judaism is based on Rabbinic Judaism. It differs, however, in the recognition that all texts were composed in given historical contexts. The Conservative Movement, in short, applies historical, critical methods to the study of the biblical text. It views the Torah as the product of generations of inspired prophets, priests, and teachers, beginning with the time of Moses but not reaching its present form until the postexilic age, in the 6th or 5th century B.C.E. (p. xxi).

This approach to the compilation of Torah, broadly accepted in the academic world, proved somewhat controversial.

Prior to the publication of *Etz Hayim*, most American Conservative synagogues relied on the Hertz Pentateuch. This classic volume, published by Soncino Press in the mid-1930s, was edited by the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire Rabbi Dr. Joseph H. Hertz. For generations it was the gold standard, and the touchstone for biblical understanding. It was widely used in Orthodox synagogues as well. The Hertz Pentateuch was groundbreaking in its time. Its publication indicated that one could study the Torah in the vernacular – in this case English – and comment on its teachings, citing not only traditional Jewish commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban) but non-Jewish scholars,

and other authors as well. This was something new for many Jews across the religious spectrum. For all that, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (the Hertz Pentateuch) took a traditional view of the authorship of the Torah. The idea that there were distinct documents "at various stages in Israel's history, [and that] those different parts have been combined and edited by a succession of 'redactors'" was regarded as blasphemy. Entire essays the section called Additional Notes were devoted to disproving the Documentary Hypothesis. Hertz wrote of "the utter baselessness of this revolutionary view of Israel's history and religion" (Genesis, Additional Notes). Hertz likewise wrote that the "internal evidence . . . for its Mosaic authorship, is overwhelming" (Deuteronomy, Additional Notes). Today, certainly for the non-Orthodox world, such assertions are considered outmoded, as the *Etz Hayim* Introduction makes clear.

Many laity of the Conservative Movement are shaken by assertions that the Torah evolved over many centuries. As a Conservative rabbi remarked, these laity are carrying – largely – their Hebrew school educations in their heads. They have not been exposed to the more academic approaches that their clergy studied in seminary. The more scholarly mainstream approach of *Etz Hayim* likewise drew criticism from many parts of Orthodox Judaism, to the religious right of Conservative Judaism.

Another area of controversy sparked by *Etz Hayim* was its use of language, and more specifically, how it treated gender-based language. The Introduction to *Etz Hayim* explained that the "English rendering" of the text followed the 2000 Jewish Publication Society edition of the Torah, even "though it has become customary in the Conservative Movement to favor gender-neutral translation wherever possible in liturgical publications" (pp. xviii-xix). This meant that the Tetragrammaton, *YHVH* was translated as "the Lord." Likewise, male pronouns were utilized in reference to God.

To understand this in context, compare these verses as found in *Etz Hayim* and the other two new Torah commentaries: *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition*; and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.

### References to God

Deuteronomy 10:20:

NJPS/Etz Hayim – *You must revere the Lord your God: only Him shall you worship, to Him shall you hold fast, and by His name shall you swear*

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition – *You must revere the Eternal: only your God shall you worship, to [God] shall you hold fast, and by God's name shall you swear*

The Torah: A Women's Commentary – *You must revere YHVH only your God shall you worship, to [God] shall you hold fast, and by God's name shall you swear*

Gender not at issue in the Hebrew text – rendered in masculine terms

Deuteronomy 1:17:

NJPS/Etz Hayim – *fear no man*

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition; The Torah: A Women's Commentary – *fear no one*

Gender at issue in the Hebrew text – rendered in neutral terms

Exodus 30:12:

NJPS/Etz Hayim – *when you take a census of the Israelite people*

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition; The Torah: A Women's Commentary – *When you take a census of the Israelite men*

Gender not at issue in the Hebrew text – NJPS unduly restricted gender roles

Exodus 21:7:

NJPS/Etz Hayim – *a man sells his daughter*

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition; The Torah: A Women's Commentary – *a parent sells a daughter*

NJPS English style that conveyed a neutral sense ambiguously

Deuteronomy 27:18:

NJPS/Etz Hayim – *he who misdirects a blind person on his way*

The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition; The Torah: A Women's Commentary – *the one who misdirects a blind person underway*

Another major feature of *Etz Hayim* is the introductory remarks and commentary on each of the additional prophetic readings, the *haftarot*. Each section presents matters of contextual historical or of literary interest. They follow links between the prophetic words and the section in the Torah. These commentaries by Michael Fishbane were condensed expressly for *Etz Hayim*, in advance, from *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (2002). They were incorporated "to foster and develop a mode of biblical literacy that might transform the words of the prophets and the ancient prophetic literature, read on Sabbaths and other sacred occasions, into words of living instruction" (p. xxi).

An important contribution of *Etz Hayim* is the 41 essays totaling over 160 pages. They are divided into four categories: Biblical Life and Perspectives; Biblical Religion and Law; Worship, Ritual and *Halakhah*; and Text and Context. These essays cover a wide range of subjects. Some highlights include:

Biblical Life/Perspectives: Biblical Archeology, Ancient Near Eastern Mythology, Women, Matriarchs and Patriarchs, Ecology.

Biblical Religion and Law: Revelation (biblical, rabbinic, medieval, modern), the Nature of Revelation and Mosaic Origins, and Eschatology.

Worship, Ritual and *Halakhah*: Priests and Levites in the Bible and Jewish Life, Dietary Laws, and medieval and modern *Halakhah*.

Text and Context: *Midrash*, Traditional and Modern Methods of Bible Study.

In a review essay, Alan J. Yuter explains:

*Etz Hayim's* scholarship reflects the serious thinking of Conservative Jews who, in an age of unbelief, try to be honest to God and to themselves. Unlike the Orthodox *Chumash: The Torah, Haftoros and Five Megillos ArtScroll*,<sup>4</sup> which presents the truth as its leaders want its laity to believe, *Etz Hayim* shares its doubts with its laity, and its authors must be commended for their intellectual honesty. The reader clearly knows where the contributors stand theologically.<sup>5</sup>

*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* concludes with many helpful materials for the student of the Bible. These include multi-colored maps of biblical lands featuring topographical features; a glossary; an artist's rendition of the

Tabernacle and its furnishings; a timeline for the Hebrew Bible; and an index of names and subjects. A list of corrections made in various printings is available online via <http://tinyurl.com/EH-errata> .

The other two newly published Torah commentaries have been reviewed: *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition (The Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. XXXVIII:127-130, 2010) and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary The (Jewish Bible Quarterly*, in press).

#### NOTES

1. Frederick E. Greenspahn, "Competing Commentaries," *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005) p. 470.
2. Leonard J. Greenspoon, *Religious Studies Review* Vol. 28, No. 4 (October 2002) pp. 361-62.
3. Greenspahn, p. 470.
4. Brooklyn: Mesorah 1993, Nosson Scherman, editor.
5. "Etz Hayim: Torah For Our Times," *Midstream* 21 (May/June 2002).



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