

TEXT AND HISTORICAL MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE COMMENTARY OF RABBI OVADIAH SFORNO ON THE TORAH

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INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno's commentary on the Torah is included in most standard rabbinic *Mikra'ot Gedolot* editions. It is famed for its brevity, insight, and emphasis on the plain sense of the text. Sforno was born in 1470 in Cesena, Italy. He lived some thirty years in Rome, where he attended university and studied philosophy, medicine, and mathematics. He also came into contact with the broader Christian community. He died in 1550.

This was the period of Renaissance Italy, when the exploration of humanistic thought was on the rise. There was a greater emphasis on the discoveries of man; the position of the individual and self-development; human creativity; and this-worldliness.¹ It was also the dark period when the Expulsion from Spain and the forced conversion of Jews in Portugal devastated the greatest Jewish community of that era.

Many of Sforno's comments on the Torah offer penetrating insights into the text. On other occasions, he appears to favor certain religious-educational themes even when there is little textual evidence for them. In studying the works of *peshat* commentators, one should begin by searching for text motivations for their interpretations. When a commentator goes beyond the text or when consistent exegetical patterns can be demonstrated, one may look elsewhere for possible motivations, and these must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Simultaneously, we gain immensely by considering the historical setting of a commentator. We can often appreciate how a given commentator was a rabbinic leader in addition to being a Bible scholar.²

In this essay, we consider three of Sforno's central themes in his commentary on the Torah: (1) prophecy in a waking state as a paradigm of the Torah's ideal of this-worldly spirituality; (2) self-actualization; and (3) repentance.

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While Sforno did not invent these concepts, he appeals to them in many circumstances when the biblical text does not require him to. We will evaluate which comments are fair text interpretations, and which appear to have been motivated by Sforno's overarching educational agenda and historical setting. Sforno's strong emphasis on this-worldly spirituality and self-actualization appears to combine text analysis with the influence of his living in Renaissance Italy. His teaching repentance in many stories where it is not evident may have been partially a response to the Jewish crisis of post-Expulsion Spain, or more generally to the Jewish Diaspora. As a general caveat, it is unclear whether an interpreter consciously knew he was deviating from the plain sense of the text or not. The fact that a certain text may clearly suggest something different does not mean that Sforno thought the same way. That being said, several perceptible trends appear in Sforno's commentary, to be discussed presently.

PROPHECY IN A WAKING STATE

The Torah does not promote other-worldliness but rather an embracing of this world and a life of holiness. Sforno appeals to Moses' prophecy as a spiritual ideal (see, e.g., his comments on Ex. 33:11, *The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another*), and develops facets of this idea throughout his commentary.

The Torah establishes that Moses' prophetic level was above that of all other prophets (Ex. 33:11, Num. 12:6-8, Deut. 34:10). Among other features, Moses received divine communiqués while in a waking state. Commenting on Exodus 19:9, Sforno suggests that the purpose of the Revelation at Sinai was for the nation to experience this exalted state for a brief moment, so that they could trust Moses in the future when he stated that he prophesied while in a waking state. This interpretation does not appear consistent with the text, as the Torah repeatedly indicates that ideally the Israelites would continue to receive prophecy, were it not for the fact they were terrified by God's Revelation and demanded that Moses serve as their intermediary (Ex. 20:15-18; Deut. 5:19-24; 18:15-18).

Elsewhere in his commentary, Sforno argues that the Golden Calf permanently damaged Israel's ideal spiritual level (e.g., Ex. 24:18; Lev. 11:2). As a consequence of this sin, later prophets did not prophesy in the waking state

attained by Moses. This comment is also difficult to support from the text. It appears that Moses' prophecy was *sui generis* and had nothing to do with its occurring prior to the Golden Calf. Moses continued to prophesy at his unique level even after the Calf. Finally, God insists that Moses' prophecy stood apart from that of Aaron and Miriam, suggesting that it was the quality of Moses' prophecy, not when he prophesied, that was decisive (Num. 12:6-8). Once again, Sforno is developing a theme that has its basis in the Torah but also goes beyond the evidence on several occasions.

Another striking interpretation pertains to a different aspect of the Revelation at Sinai: *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank* (Ex. 24:9-11).

Many commentators understand that the reference to God's not raising His hand against the leaders means that God did not strike them for doing something inappropriate – perhaps "seeing" God, or eating during this exalted moment. Sforno, in contrast, interprets the passage in a positive sense: God did not intervene to suspend their conscious state during the Revelation, and allowed them to prophesy while in a waking state. The elders therefore ate and drank to celebrate this higher level of prophecy.³

To summarize, Moses' superior prophecy is explicit in the Torah. Sforno appeals to this ideal of prophecy in a waking state to explain an ambiguous passage during the Revelation (Ex. 24:9-11), and goes beyond the textual evidence regarding Israel's receiving revelation at Sinai and in explaining the Golden Calf as the root cause for the decline in Israel's prophecy following Moses. It is evident that Sforno wanted to impart this notion of spirituality to his readers whenever possible. Perhaps his living in Renaissance Italy also influenced his desire to emphasize the Torah's ideal of this-worldly spirituality.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Sforno takes special interest in people actualizing their potential as creations in the image of God, and develops this theme from the beginning of

Genesis. The Creation narratives in the first two chapters of Genesis appear to have several contradictions. These include (1) the order of certain creations—plants, animals, people in chapter 1, and man, plants, animals, and woman in chapter 2; and (2) man and woman being created together in chapter 1 versus man being created first in chapter 2.

Many classical commentators, including Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, explain the second chapter as a detailing of the first chapter. Chapter 2, then, occurs during the sixth day of creation. These commentators employ various strategies for reconciling the discrepancies in the order of the creation.

Adopting an elitist approach, Rambam and Ramban insist that the text contains the esoteric secrets of Creation and should therefore not be understood literally. Ramban (on Gen. 1:1) states that the Creation narratives are beyond our ken. As for the mysteries of the Creation, he adds (on 1:6) that it is forbidden for those who know them to reveal them to others. Similarly, Rambam maintains that the true meaning of Creation should be withheld from those ignorant of metaphysics (*Guide* II:29).

Unlike his predecessors, Sforno (on 2:4) submits that, in chapter 1, God created only potential. Nothing became actualized until chapter 2 and the advent of man. Consequently, the two chapters do not conflict at all. Rather, chapter 2 chronologically follows chapter 1. Sforno's view is most striking in his explanation (on 2:8) that man was placed in Eden in chapter 2 in order to actualize the divine image potential with which he was created in chapter 1. Despite the fact that chapter 1 appears to describe a physical creation, Sforno insists that God's creation revolves around the fulfillment of potential. So, too, humanity is charged with fulfilling its potential.⁴

In his introduction to Genesis, Sforno convincingly argues that the theme of the Chosen People is central to the book. All the descendants of Adam and Eve should have served God properly, but after three sins God instead chose Abraham to teach the rest of humanity: "When it was apparent that there was no longer any hope that the human race as a whole would repent, having thwarted the Divine plan on their behalf on two and three different occasions, God then chose a pious man from among the entire species (of man), Abraham and his seed, to attain through them the goal intended by Him from the moment man had been placed on earth . . ."⁵

Abraham's family went through a selection process that continued until the conclusion of Genesis, when it becomes clear that the descendants of all Jacob's sons would form the Chosen People. This outcome was not God's ideal plan at the time of Creation, but rather a concession to the failings of most of humanity.

Similarly, God chose Israel to teach humanity how to fulfill their Image of God potential. God stressed this mission immediately preceding the Revelation when God calls Israel *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6). Sforno comments: "In this fashion you will be the treasure of them all by being a kingdom of priests, to understand and teach the entire human race that all shall call on the Name of Hashem and serve Him with one accord."⁶

Elsewhere, Sforno exploits an obscure set of details to reinforce the idea that Abraham and his descendants were chosen to teach humanity to pursue their potential. Genesis chapter 5 spans the ten generations from Adam to Noah, and chapter 11 lists the next ten generations from Noah to Abraham. Each narrative follows an internally consistent format:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image, and he named him Seth. After the birth of Seth, Adam lived 800 years and begot sons and daughters. All the days that Adam lived came to 930 years; then he died (Gen. 5:3-5).

This is the line of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the Flood. After the birth of Arpachshad, Shem lived 500 years and begot sons and daughters (Gen. 11:10-11).

Chapter 5 includes an additional verse for each person, in which the age when the person bore his son is added to the years that person lived afterwards. It also notes that each person died. Chapter 11 does not tally the years, nor does it explicitly mention that each person died.

Based on the number of years they lived, Sforno observes that all the people from Adam through Noah's father Lemech died prior to the Flood. In contrast, all of the generations from Noah through Terah were still alive when Abraham was born. Sforno submits that this is why the Torah does not say *and he died* in chapter 11. God wanted all the generations to witness the superior righteousness of Abraham. Abraham was committed to teaching his

household about the ways of God (Gen. 18:17-19), a responsibility nobody had taken until he arrived.

To summarize, Sforno convincingly identifies the actualization of potential – on the individual and national levels – as a central theme in the Torah. He cogently argues that the Book of Genesis revolves around this theme, and ties in other references in the Torah that likewise teach its importance. Sforno also projects this theme onto details where the text does not point compellingly in that direction, such as his explanation of the creation accounts in Genesis chapters 1-2 and the name lists in Genesis chapters 5 and 11. Once again, perhaps living in Renaissance Italy influenced his desire to emphasize this religious-educational principle of self-actualization even in instances that go beyond the textual evidence.

REPENTANCE

While repentance is a central tenet of biblical thought, Sforno often projects it onto Torah narratives, even when nothing in the text suggests repentance. In his introduction to Exodus, he asserts that the main theme of the book is sin and repentance. Israel was enslaved because of its sin of idolatry (see Ezek. 20:8-9). A few Israelites repented and this repentance sparked the redemption. Similarly, the Tabernacle was given as a sign of remorse for the Golden Calf.

These assertions are surprising. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land that was not theirs (Gen. 15:13-16), and there is no clear indication in the Torah that the slavery was a punishment for any sin.⁷ Furthermore, while Ezekiel refers to Israelite idolatry while in Egypt, he does not present it as the cause for their slavery. Rather, Ezekiel develops a framework that God wanted to destroy the Israelites while in Egypt, but redeemed them instead. Thus, Sforno's interpretation finds no support in Exodus and his thesis is not supported by the plain sense of the Ezekiel passage he adduces. Finally, it is far from clear in the Torah that Israel's repentance triggered the Exodus. God heard Israel's cry for help from their bondage (Ex. 2:23-25), but that outcry does not necessarily indicate repentance so much as moaning from servitude. Regardless, the primary reasons for God's redeeming the Israelites are His covenant with the Patriarchs

and His desire to rescue an oppressed people from slavery (Ex. 3:6-10; 6:2-5).

Sforno's claim that the Tabernacle was a result of Israel's repenting of the Golden Calf also is dubious from a text standpoint. The Tabernacle could have been given as an ideal, as per Ramban's interpretation that its purpose was to enable the Israelites to relive Sinai every day. There is also little sign of the people's repentance after the Calf. Moses' intervention on their behalf lies at the center of Israel's atonement.⁸

To summarize, Sforno's central principle for understanding Exodus does not appear evident in the text. To explain this anomalous thesis, we may appeal to Sforno's historical setting. Perhaps he is speaking to the Jewish community after the Spanish Expulsion or to exiled Jews in general. Sforno's message is that exile is a punishment for sins. It is also noteworthy that Sforno emphasizes that the repentance of a few brought about the Exodus. So, too, he stokes the hope that only a few Jews need to repent now in order to bring about redemption.

Sforno also introduces repentance elsewhere in the Torah where it does not appear evident in the text. For example, the Torah enumerates several purposes for the plagues, including: (1) to punish the Egyptians (Ex. 4:21-23); (2) to rescue the Israelites (3:20; 6:6; 7:4); (3) to teach the Egyptians about God (see 4:5,9; 5:2; 7:5,17); (4) to teach the Israelites about God (4:5, 9; 10:2); (5) to demonstrate the worthlessness of the gods of Egypt (12:12); and (6) to build the Israelites' trust in Moses (14:31).

Despite these text-based reasons, Sforno (e.g., on Ex. 4:23; 7:3-4; 8:12; 9:16) submits that God sent the first nine plagues to give the Egyptians opportunities to repent. Only the plague of the firstborn and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea should be viewed as retribution and punishment of the Egyptians for enslaving and murdering the Israelites.⁹

Sforno pursues this novel interpretation when explaining God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21). Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:1-3) maintains that as a consequence of Pharaoh's immorality, God punished him by actively depriving him of free will. Ramban observes that the first five plagues describe Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart, and the second five depict God actively hardening Pharaoh's heart. He explains that God gave Pharaoh a fair chance to free the Israelites, and then interceded after it became clear that

Pharaoh would never willingly let the Israelites go. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpreters, including Shadal, Cassuto, and Sarna explain that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the biblical way of saying that "Pharaoh was stubborn." In their reading, God did not actively influence Pharaoh's decisions.

Following R. Saadiah Gaon (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 4:6) and Abrabanel, Sforno maintains that God actively intervened to give Pharaoh a fair opportunity to repent. Had He not hardened Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh would have let Israel go out of coercion by the plagues. God therefore hardened Pharaoh's heart to the point where he would have the genuine ability to freely choose to let them go.

To cite two other brief examples where Sforno invokes repentance when it is not evident in the text: On Exodus 32:15, Sforno asks why Moses brought the tablets down from Sinai if God had already informed him that the people were sinning with the Golden Calf. His answer is that Moses hoped that the moment they saw him they would repent. If not, he would shatter the tablets to inspire repentance.

In Numbers chapter 12, God rebukes Miriam and Aaron for speaking against Moses. God then afflicts Miriam with the skin disease of *tzara'at*: *Still incensed with them, the Lord departed. As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales!* (Num. 12:9-10). It appears that God's being infuriated with them refers to their original complaints against Moses. However, Sforno explains that after God's rebuke, He paused to give Miriam and Aaron a chance to repent. When they remained silent, God became angry with them and afflicted Miriam with *tzara'at*.

Of course, the theme of sin-repentance-redemption is biblical. Nonetheless, Sforno's appeal to repentance in many instances where the Torah does not speak about it demonstrates his desire to teach it whenever possible. It could be that Sforno was partly motivated by living in the painful age of expulsion and exile, or that he was referring more generally to the state of exile. In the absence of explicit references to the Spanish Expulsion, it is unclear if Sforno was motivated specifically by that cataclysmic event, or more generally by Diaspora existence. At any rate, Sforno implicitly ascribed exile to sin, and encouraged Jews to repent in the hope of attaining redemption.

CONCLUSION

Sforno is committed to teaching that ideal spirituality in the Torah is this-worldly. All individuals should strive to fulfill their image of God potential and Israel's role as the Chosen People is to teach this message to the world. The door is always open to repentance, and the repentance of a few can bring redemption for all.

Some of Sforno's interpretations have a strong basis in the text of the Torah, whereas others find little or no textual support. In some cases it may be that living in Renaissance Italy and at the time of the Spanish Expulsion, or more generally in exile, influenced his desire to highlight certain themes beyond the textual evidence.

By evaluating Sforno's comments against the text, we are often enlightened as to the meaning of the Torah. When he consistently deviates from the text itself, we gain a sense of what was important to this great rabbinic scholar living in a sixteenth-century milieu. Where one draws the line between pure textual interpretation and historical circumstances is a matter for debate. However one draws the line between the point where interpretation ends and historical setting begins, we continue to delight in the penetrating and enduring teachings of Rabbi Ovadyah Sforno some 500 years after he wrote his commentary.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the significant characteristics of the Renaissance and biblical interpretation during that period, see M. Saebo, "From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2: *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment (1300–1800)*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) pp. 21–45; E. Lawee, "Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2, pp. 190–214. I thank Professor Lawee for reading an earlier draft of this essay and for his comments.
2. H. Angel, review essay: "*Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume: The Paradox of Parshanut: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators?*," *Tradition*, 38:4 (Winter 2004) pp. 112–128; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006) pp. 56–76.
3. Sforno was preceded by Abrabanel, who also offered a more favorable interpretation of this passage. For discussion of Abrabanel's interpretation and its implications for his exegetical methodology, see E. Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001) pp. 59–82.
4. For further discussion of the classical commentators on the discrepancies between Genesis chapters 1–2, see H. Angel, "The Psalmist as an Exegete," *Jewish Thought*, 5:1 (Fall-Winter

1998) pp. 9-20; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens*, pp. 97-110. It should be noted that long before Sforno, Philo of Alexandria suggested a similar interpretation in his *Questions on Genesis*. See N. Solomon, *Torah from Heaven: The Reconstruction of Faith* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012) p. 118.

5. Translations from *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*, trans. R. Pelcovitz (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1987).

6. For further discussion of Sforno's view and the subject of the Chosen People in general, see H. Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations*, 8 (Fall 2010) pp. 52-60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011) pp. 25-34.

7. Although the Torah never explicitly links the slavery to any sin, several *midrashim* and later commentators search for explanations. TB *Nedarim* 32a offers three opinions blaming Abraham for the slavery of his descendants. Abrabanel suggests that Joseph's brothers' jealousy and sale of Joseph, as well as Joseph's own role in provoking his brothers, are to blame. Y. Kiel (*Da'at Mikra: Genesis*, vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997]) submits that the Israelites should have left Egypt after the famine in Joseph's time had ended; because they remained, they were enslaved (for a survey of traditional opinions, see Kiel, pp. 426-8).

Abrabanel (Gen. 15, question #15) quotes Ran and Hasdai Crescas, who assert that the Israelite enslavement was not a punishment. Ran suggests that it was intended to humble Israel, so that they would be able to accept the Torah later on. Similarly, Crescas maintains that God wanted to perform miracles for the Israelites so that they would learn that God controls the universe. Although Abrabanel initially prefers to believe that all calamities occur as the result of some sin, he eventually concedes that the slavery may have served to refine and purify Israel (cf. references to Egypt as a "refining pot" in Deut. 4:20; I Kings 8:51; Jer. 4:11).

8. On Exodus 24:18, Sforno assumes that the priesthood was selected post-Golden Calf as well, and therefore the commandment for the Tabernacle must have been given after the Calf episode, serving as an atonement and concession. While it is clear that the Levites replaced the firstborn in the wake of the Golden Calf (see Deut. 9-10), it is not clear that the priesthood from Aaron was also a consequence.

9. It is noteworthy that the slaying of the firstborn is generally called a plague (*makkah*). The others are referred to as signs and wonders (*otot u-mofetim*), signs used to teach Egypt and Israel about God. The only instance in Tanakh where all ten plagues are referred to as such is in the mouth of the pagan Philistines (I Sam. 4:8).