

Elu Ve-elul Divrei Elohim Hayyim: A Biblical View



Marc Zvi Brettler

THE WELL-KNOWN Hebrew expression, *elu ve-ulu divrei Elohim hayyim*, “both this and that are the words of the all-powerful God,” the embodiment of a multi-perspectival or pluralistic position, is, of course, a rabbinic expression. Yet the pluralist idea that it expresses has very strong biblical roots; this is even reflected in the fact that the expression uses the biblical term *Elohim hayyim*, “the all-powerful God” (literally: the living God), which first occurs in Deuteronomy 5:23, after the giving of the Decalogue (what others call the Ten Commandments), where the Israelites say: “For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God (*Elohim hayyim*) speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived?”

The Decalogue appears twice in the Bible: in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Both accounts present themselves as the single authoritative recalling of the divine words; immediately before the Exodus Decalogue, we read: “God spoke all these words, saying,” while the Deuteronomy Decalogue is followed by: “The LORD spoke those words — those and no more — to your whole congregation at the mountain. . . .” Yet, the “words” of Exodus and Deuteronomy are not identical. For example, in Exodus, the Israelites are commanded to “remember the Sabbath day” in commemoration of the creation of the world, while in Deuteronomy, they are commanded to “observe the Sabbath day” in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. A monolithic text would not offer two fundamentally different reasons why the Sabbath should be commemorated.

There are also significant differences in the Torah between different sources or passages concerning specific legal practices. For example, Exodus 22:30 legislates that no Israelite may eat carrion, or *terefah*: “You shall be holy people to Me: you must not eat flesh torn by beasts (*terefah*) in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs,” while Leviticus 22:8 legislates that only priests (*kohanim*) must avoid this *terefah*. In fact, Leviticus 17:15 legislates in reference to non-Priests: “Any person, whether citizen or stranger, who eats what has died or has been torn by beasts shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he shall be clean.” In other words, they

may eat *terefah*, but must then ritually cleanse themselves. The striking juxtaposition is likely connected to a fundamental philosophical difference found in Torah texts concerning whether all Israel or just the priests need to be holy.

Is Israel holy, or is Israel *supposed to be* holy? The text from Exodus 22:30, “You shall be holy people,” suggests the latter; the same

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viewpoint is found in the famous verse from *Kedoshim*, from Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Yet, Deuteronomy 7:6 presents Israel’s holiness as an established fact: “For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people” (see similarly 14:2, 21). Which is it: is Israel intrinsically holy (and thus, e.g., it may never eat *terefah*), or must it aspire to holiness?

Other major philosophical differences emerge when comparing the narrative framework of the Decalogue in Exodus to Deuteronomy. The most significant of these differences concerns whether or not God was visible at Sinai. Most readers recall Deuteronomy 4:12: “the Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape — nothing but a voice.” Yet, Exodus 24:10-11, concerning Moses, Aaron, two of Aaron’s children, and 70 elders, reads: “and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of lapis lazuli, 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.” Which is it — was or was not God visible at revelation?

There are many, many more examples of diversity within the Torah, beginning already from its first chapters, which narrate two fundamentally different stories of the creation of the world. This diversity is not limited to the Torah: texts from the rest of the Bible, from the Prophets and Writings, are highly diverse

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March 2006
Nisan 5766

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of Babel is a monument to human “unity.” The builders work together to create a structure that reaches the heavens. But in the process, they ignore the dignity and uniqueness of each individual human being. They mistake oneness for sameness, and for this they are punished with a grand lesson in human diversity.

The *mishkan*, in contrast, is a monument to divine unity. Significantly, this building process is one that honors the unique contri-

bution that each member of the community has to offer. “Take from among you gifts to the Lord; everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them . . . gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns.”

It is as if we are instructed to make our own rainbow, a rich tapestry of colors reflecting the Oneness of the God who created them all, who created us all. This is what is required if we are to create dwelling places for God on earth.



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counting the number of graduate students working in Yiddish was not entirely out of the question. Since then, the number of people creating their own Yiddishland has probably increased exponentially. Evenings like those occupy a space worthy of a thousand postcards and souvenirs. While few of us live permanently in Yiddishland, thanks to Jeffrey Shandler, we do have the beginnings of a map.



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as well. For example, 2 Samuel 11-12 narrates David's affair with Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah, and his condemnation by Nathan the prophet. The book of Chronicles, a retelling of history from Genesis through Kings, omits this entire episode, creating a much more righteous David. Psalm 8:6 says that humanity is “little less than divine, and adorned . . . with glory and majesty,” while Job 25:6 insists that man is “a worm . . . a maggot.” In each of these cases, which perspective is right? Was David perfect or right? Is humanity a bit lower than God or a bit more than a maggot?

This essay does not purport to explain why the Bible contains diversity; it is sufficient to note that the Bible is a complex anthology, a collection of collections, representing a millennium of texts from different places, eras, and classes. (For more details, see my book *How to Read the Bible*.) The Bible is not at all a monolithic text, but is multi-perspectival and pluralistic, already from its first stories. This type of pluralism, so often associated with rabbinic culture, thus has strong biblical roots. To the extent that the Bible is *the* central Jewish text, and it embodies pluralism, pluralism is a fundamental Jewish value, which can only be ignored at great peril to ourselves and our community.



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