

THE DA'AT MIKRA COMMENTARY SERIES: BETWEEN TRADITION AND CRITICISM

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More than 30 years have passed since the publication of the first volume in the Da'at Mikra series (*Torah, Neviim, Kethuvim im Peirush Daat Mikra*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971-2003). Such a leisurely pace for the completion of a Bible commentary is hardly unique to Da'at Mikra; educated readers can certainly name other series whose publication history lasted longer than expected. The first volume of the American Anchor Bible series, for example, appeared in 1965 but the series is still incomplete.

Da'at Mikra was a trailblazer. The first volume appeared in the early 1970s: *Joshua*, with a commentary by Yehuda Kiel, who went on to produce many other volumes in the series. It should be remembered that at the time the only modern Hebrew commentaries on the entire Tanakh were those of A.B. Ehrlich, M.Z. Segal, S.L. Gordon, and M. Artom.

In the present article I will examine the contribution of Da'at Mikra to the history of Jewish Bible exegesis, including a comparison with other series in Hebrew and other languages, and attempt to identify its strong and weak points. The questions to be addressed include the following: Has the series achieved the objectives it set itself? Does it merit the designation "scholarly"? How does it deal with problems of Bible criticism?

A steering committee formulated the guidelines for the publication of Da'at Mikra in 1963. They have now been published by Kiel in a short volume released to mark the conclusion of the enterprise.¹ These guidelines provide an insight into the method followed in the series and the principles applied in the writing of the commentaries, even though not all the authors consistently hewed to the guidelines. The following point bears particular note:

On the one hand, the commentary must be based on the traditional classical exegesis, starting from the interpretations of the talmudic sages and running through the most recent commentators without a traditional-academic bent. On the other hand, it should

take account of and invoke the results of modern scholarship in the domains of exegesis, philology, history, geography, archeology, and so on, *to the extent that the conclusions of such scholarship do not run counter to Jewish tradition* [emphasis by the author].

THE SERIES' STRONG POINTS

1. To the credit of the series is the fact the editors used first the Leningrad Codex and later the Aleppo Codex as the basis for their text. *Mikra Leyisrael* follows the same route² and the editors of the *Olam ha-tanakh* series chose the Leningrad Codex.

2. Both *Olam ha-tanakh* and *Mikra Leyisrael* were influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by Da'at Mikra, at least with regard to the external format of the commentary. In this context it is interesting to note that Amos Hakham, who wrote the commentary on Job for Da'at Mikra, was invited to write the commentary on parts of this book for *Olam ha-tanakh* as well.

3. Da'at Mikra is marked by a clear and serious effort to provide as broad a picture as possible of geographical and historical matters. A comparison of Kiel's commentary on Samuel with Shimon Bar-Efrat's on the same book for *Mikra Leyisrael* reveals the former's greater emphasis on realia – an area almost totally ignored by Bar-Efrat.

4. Another achievement of the series is that it is cited in the more recent Hebrew commentaries on the Bible, *Olam ha-tanakh* and *Mikra Leyisrael*, as well as in a number of academic periodicals and international commentaries.

5. The presence of the series on the shelves of many public libraries in Israel and abroad is evidence of its broad recognition. We should also mention the fact that Yehuda Kiel won the Israel Prize for Bible Studies for 5752 (1992) for his work on this enterprise. An English version of the series was initiated in 2003. To date, Amos Hakham's commentary on Psalms has been published, in three volumes.³

6. Jehuda Feliks's broad knowledge of ancient botany and zoology is cited extensively in the various commentaries. He is also cited in the *Olam ha-tanakh*.

7. The series makes a real contribution in its citation of talmudic and midrashic sources and extensive references to the medieval commentators, thereby making their contribution and insights available to the masses. Of

particular note is Kiel's discussion of the exegesis of the talmudic sages and medieval commentators on Chronicles in his appendix to his commentary on that book.

8. The series deals at length with issues associated with the cantillation signs. Mordecai Breuer contributed introductions to Genesis and to Psalms about the two separate systems of signs. In addition, many notes related to the cantillation signs are scattered through the commentaries. This issue is almost totally ignored in the *Olam ha-tanakh* and *Mikra Leyisrael*.

THE SERIES' WEAK POINTS

The Introductions:

All of the introductions to the various books in the series tend to address a similar list of issues: The book's position in the biblical corpus; its name; the identity of its author; the date of its composition; its language; its outlook; and problems specific to each particular book. These are the issues treated by the Da'at Mikra series. That of the actual text of the Bible is not – an issue to which we shall return below.

The introductions by Kiel are fairly long. Sometimes their relevance is not obvious. Readers of Kiel's introduction to Genesis will note that it stretches to no less than 150 pages, and may well ask why it needs a long discussion of Jerusalem, which is never even mentioned in the Torah. The introduction to Chronicles runs to 190 pages, plus an additional 104 pages of appendices. This, too, could certainly have been shortened.

We should also note a feature found throughout the series: lists of verbal parallels between the book in question and other biblical books. Here our astonishment is even greater; except for the introduction to Proverbs and the appendices to Chronicles, the various commentators merely list the parallels but say nothing about their significance, their contribution to dating the book, the differences between the parallels, and so on. These lists, too, take up too many pages. The series unfortunately makes no use of the achievements of the literary approach to the Bible, one of whose hallmarks is noting parallels between various books and uncovering their significance.

At the other extreme is Yehuda Elitzur's commentary on Judges. His publications are evidence of his breadth of knowledge and ability to deal comprehensively with biblical and fundamental principles. But his

commentary on Judges leaves readers, familiar with his articles, disappointed with the great brevity adopted both in the introduction to the book and in the introductions to and summaries of the individual sections.

Textual Criticism:

The Da'at Mikra series generally ignores the multi-textual reality of the Bible, dealing selectively with only one aspect thereof: medieval Hebrew manuscripts. The reasons for this, as indicated by Menahem Cohen in his comprehensive article on the sanctity of the biblical text,⁴ are associated with the reticence to touch the Holy Scriptures or to suggest ideas that are not compatible with the traditional outlook.⁵

Here and there, it is true, we find references to the Septuagint or the Dead Sea Scrolls. But these are limited and presented in a fashion that does not permit readers to relate to the evidence seriously and judge it for themselves. Such an approach is clearly incompatible with the academic method. Jack Lundbom's Anchor Bible commentary on Jeremiah shows how a discussion of the different textual versions can develop in directions that do not necessarily run counter to "Jewish tradition." In most cases of disagreements between the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX), he prefers the former and tries to explain how the LXX variant arose. The editors of Da'at Mikra could have adopted a similar approach. Although it is not accepted by all Bible scholars today, it would at least offer a reasonable interpretation.

As an example of Da'at Mikra's problematic approach to textual cruxes, consider Kiel's commentary on I Samuel 13:15: *Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. Saul numbered the troops who remained with him – about 600 strong* (NJPS). The problem with this verse is that it is far from clear just what Samuel is doing in Gibeah of Benjamin. The Septuagint reflects a different *Vorlage*: "Samuel arose and went up *from Gilgal* and went his way. The rest of the people followed Saul to meet the soldiers, and they went *from Gilgal* to Gibeah of Benjamin. Saul numbered the troops who remained with him – 600 strong."

In his commentary on Samuel (p. 118 n. 29), Kiel writes: "The Greek translated that Samuel went up from Gilgal and went his way." This note is useful only for someone who already knows the differences between the two

versions. There is no attempt to explain the variants or to decide which is preferable. In this case, many readers would clearly opt for the Septuagint.

It is interesting that in earlier ages there were commentators who accepted the existence of textual variants.⁶ For example, with regard to the variants between Chronicles and Ezra the commentary attributed to Rashi notes that when Ezra, to whom the tradition assigned responsibility for the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, found contradictory versions, he decided on the basis of the principle of majority versus minority.⁷

With regard to the assumption of the antiquity of the books of the Bible, the editors of the series come up losers. They could have borrowed from Catholic commentators who endeavored to demonstrate the antiquity of the Torah and other biblical books that have been attributed to later periods. Drawing on such commentaries and studies would have strengthened the editors' arguments, in a way that would give readers the impression that the discussion follows the rules of the academic world, even if only in part.⁸

DECIDING AMONG CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

Nehama Leibowitz was a member of the committee that drew up the guidelines for the commentaries. One of the important methodological principles that she insisted on in her books and studies is that students of biblical exegesis over the generations cannot merely collect the various commentaries. We must, rather, analyze, compare, and juxtapose, study the differences, and – the uncompromising demand she makes of her readers – decide which of them seems most plausible and why. This principle is almost totally ignored in the Da'at Mikra series.

We can illustrate this by looking at Kiel's commentary on II Samuel 7. One of the key questions there is why David was forbidden to build the Temple. Kiel presents several interpretations and concludes, "both are the words of the living God." It seems, however, that such an attitude is unfaithful to the goal for which he wrote his commentary. At the very least, he should indicate the weaknesses of some interpretations and the strengths of others.

Kiel followed a similar approach in his commentary on Genesis 15, where the question is inescapable: Why were the Israelites doomed to bondage in Egypt?

Yehiel Moskowitz did the same thing in his discussion of Moses' sin at the Waters of Meribah. For comparison, look at Milgrom's commentary on Numbers for *Olam ha-tanakh*. Milgrom groups the various interpretations of Moses' transgression into several categories, examines the weaknesses of each, and indicates what he considers to be the most plausible option.

Menachem Bolle's commentary on the story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1 adopts a different and equally undesirable approach. Here the commentator offers his own opinion about their sin and ignores all other views. Even though I tend to agree with his explanation, a better method is that of Jacob Milgrom in the Anchor Bible Leviticus, where he analyzes the various explanations and exposes their weaknesses.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Several of the Da'at Mikra commentators report that they have borrowed from academic commentaries, or, in their words, "the very most recent [commentators]" – for example, the commentaries on Proverbs and Job. But most of the volumes do not include formal bibliographies. In fact, they can be found only in the commentaries on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah and, by allusion, on Jeremiah. The other volumes generally make do with references embedded in the notes. In his commentaries, Amos Hakham frequently observes that "some say," "some interpret" (for example, in his commentary on Isaiah, pp. 162 and 287), without identifying them. The notes to Kiel's commentaries do include many references to previous scholarship, but only to that written in Hebrew.⁹

The commentaries on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, which are followed by a select bibliography in which most of the works are not in Hebrew, should be singled out for praise.

Da'at Mikra claims to be addressed to teachers and to educated laypersons. If to teachers, we must ask: What benefit can they derive from the notes? It seems likely that they do not use most of the information provided there. As for educated laymen, what are they supposed to do with notes that present only incomplete, filtered, and censored information? Who are the authorities hiding behind "some say" and "some interpret"? In this fashion, the information provided to readers is either unnecessary or incomplete – in which case it certainly does not fulfill its purpose.

AVOIDANCE OF REFERENCE TO THE WORKS OF NON-JEWISH COMMENTATORS

In ages past, Jewish commentators understood the importance of studying and benefiting from the works of non-Jews. Joseph Ibn Aknin did so in his Arabic commentary on the Song of Songs.¹⁰ Abravanel, in his introduction to the Former Prophets, acknowledged that he drew on the writings of non-Jews. Maimonides, of course, drew on the Greek philosophers. But scrutiny of the various commentaries in the Da'at Mikra series reveals that the use of non-Jewish commentators is extremely sketchy and sometimes their ideas are cited without credit.

Kiel's commentaries never include a bibliography of non-Hebrew works. The same holds for the commentaries on the Torah, written by several hands. Job is noteworthy for the lack of any bibliography whatsoever.

Implicit here is a problem with which Torah-observant scholars must contend: Is everything that is not absolutely compatible with the views of the sages to be considered heresy? Are the glimmers of the critical approach visible in the commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra heresy? Was Judah the Pious a heretic?¹¹ In practice, heresy was never defined precisely; what one generation deemed heretical might be considered traditional by another one. Remember, for example, that Thirteen Principles of Faith were formulated at a relatively late date – the Middle Ages. Marc Shapiro's recent *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*¹² refers to various texts that imply that many thought traditional what Maimonides denounced as heretical – for example, the corporealization of the Deity.

With regard to the biblical text, textual criticism does not necessarily contradict belief in God. It is clear that not all books of the Bible have come down to us exactly as they left the hand of their authors; corruptions are inevitable, as medieval manuscripts indicate.

With regard to the composition of the books of the Bible, a more complex situation could have been described. The Da'at Mikra commentary on Deuteronomy (written by A. Mirsky) gives no indication that there is any problem about the identity of the author of the book and its date of composition. But these issues were discussed by the rabbis; the dispute between Nahmanides and Abravanel is particularly well known. There is also Abraham Ibn Ezra's position on the "Mystery of the Twelve [Verses]."¹³ None

of these receive even passing mention in the introduction or the body of the commentary.

Abravanel had no hesitations about attributing the authorship of Samuel to Ezra, because of the allusions to a later date he found in it.¹⁴ Ibn Ezra assigned Isaiah's prophecies of consolation, in the second half of the book, to a prophet of the Second Temple era.¹⁵

HOW DA'AT MIKRA RESOLVES CONTRADICTIONS

The views of the talmudic sages or classical commentators are generally invoked to explain contradictions between biblical verses.

1. The contradiction between the first two chapters of Genesis is resolved according to the method of Soloveitchik,¹⁶ who wrote that the two accounts of the creation of man portray two types of man, two human ideals, the "natural work community" and the "covenantal faith community."

2. The books of II Kings and Jeremiah disagree as to whether the First Temple was destroyed on the seventh day of Av or the ninth of that month.¹⁷ Even someone who has never looked at the Da'at Mikra commentaries on the relevant passages might conjecture a priori that their explanation endeavors to harmonize the discrepancy between the two dates – as is in fact the case.

3. The commentary on Ezekiel intentionally avoids any comprehensive discussion of the contradictions between that book and Leviticus. Nor is there a discussion of the issue in the introduction to Chapters 40 – 48, where most of these contradictions are found. Instead, solutions are offered for each case individually. Hence, readers interested in a single list of all these contradictions will not find it in Da'at Mikra.

4. In his commentary on I Chronicles 21, concerning David's census, Kiel (p. 378) deals with the contradictions between II Samuel 24 and I Chronicles 21 with regard to the different counts. He quotes at length the opinion of R. Eliezer the son of R. Jose Hagelili, who offers a harmonizing solution of the problem, and concludes with the nebulous remark that, "in any case, the author of Chronicles also had another source for this incident." Treated in this vague fashion, the issue will be understood properly only by those who already have some knowledge about the issue of the Chronicler's sources. Readers who wish to interpret the contradiction according to the opinion of the sages will also be comfortable. Other contradictions in the chapter are

resolved in accordance with Abravanel. In other places Kiel simply notes, "in the parallel passage [in Samuel] it is written," without explaining what this may mean from the perspective of textual criticism.

SUMMARY

In general, the Da'at Mikra series advanced modern Jewish exegesis of the Bible. Teachers and students can use it to understand the plain meaning of the biblical text. It seems, however, that an opportunity was missed to bridge the increasingly problematic gap between the academic community and observant Jews. Whenever it can be demonstrated that the exegetical problems are not new and that the solutions offered by modern critical scholarship were proposed long ago by ancient and medieval sages, the opportunity for bridging between the two worlds is increased. Because the series in its present format is consciously addressed to the Orthodox world, its benefits are counterbalanced by its flaws. Readers who are not religiously observant will find it difficult to identify with its scholarly guidelines.¹⁸

Of course, we should not expect Da'at Mikra to be a critical series no different from any other. It is clear to all that this is not possible for a book published by Mossad Harav Kook. But Daniel Sperber's volumes on Jewish customs,¹⁹ also published by that institution, reveals that even within the existing limitations it is possible to publish a book that satisfies academic standards while respecting the boundaries of tradition. Perhaps there were things that should not be said aloud in an age when there were debates with Islam and Christianity. Today, however, when those are behind us, a call should go out to bring traditional Jewish studies closer to critical studies.

With regard to the approach to critical study of the Bible, the acceptance of the rules of the academic approach is selective. Only conclusions that square with the editors' views are permitted. Unlike the approach of David Zvi Hoffmann, who defended the antiquity of Leviticus by refuting the arguments of the critical scholars point by point, the editors preferred to ignore this issue totally in the commentary on Leviticus. Those who wish to offer readers a scientific or even a semi-scientific commentary must play by the rules.

I find myself in complete agreement with Moshe Bernstein who wrote: "We must study the biblical text with our own open eyes and endeavor to respond to *all of the problems* with which it presents us."²⁰

NOTES

1. Y. Kiel, *Le-gomro shel ha-mif'al ha-parshani "Da'at Mikra"* (On the conclusion of the Da'at Mikra commentary enterprise) (Alon Shevut, 2002/3).
2. After my lecture, I learned this detail from Shmuel Ahituv, one of the editors of the series. He told me that Breuer did not want to have his name blazoned prominently on a critical series like Mikra Leyisrael. The third edition of Breuer's edition of the Tanakh was published Mossad Harav Kook in 1993.
3. Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*, trans. Israel V. Berman, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003).
4. M. Cohen, "The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism," (Heb.) in *Ha-mikra ve'annahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Tel Aviv: Hamakhon le-yahadut u-mahshavah bat-zemanenu and Dvir, 1979) pp. 42–69.
5. Cf. S. Vargon, "S. D. Luzzatto as a Pioneer of Jewish Bible Scholarship," (Heb.) in R. Kasher and M. Zipor, eds., *Studies in Bible and Exegesis 6: Yehuda Otto Komlosh – In Memoriam* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002) pp. 72–79.
6. Y. Maori, "Rabbinic Midrash as Evidence for Textual Variants in the Hebrew Bible: History and Practice," in S. Carmy, ed., *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996) pp. 101–29.
7. See Richard Steiner, "A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium: Its Rabbinic Roots, Its Diffusion and Its Encounter with the Muslim Doctrine of Falsification," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* [<http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSII/2-2003/Steiner.pdf>] pp. 123–67.
8. See, for example, the discussion about the composition of Deuteronomy in the following: J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1974); Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).
9. Among those whom he mentions are M.Z. Segal, Y. Kaufmann, and Y. Grintz. Of interest is the unusual note of M. Zer-Kavod in his commentary to the book of Zechariah (*Sepher Zechariah*, in *Tere Asar im Perush Da'at Mikra*, Vol. II, Jerusalem 1970, p. 7), in which many German scholars are mentioned. I thank Lenn Schramm for this reference.
10. Joseph Ibn Akinin, *Hitgallut ha-sodot ve-hofa'at ha-me'orot*, ed. and trans. A. S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1964) pp. 493–95.
11. See G. Brin, "Studies in R. Judah the Pious" (Heb.), *Te'udah* 3 (1983) pp. 215–26; I. M. Ta-Shema, "Bible Criticism in Early Medieval France and Germany" (Heb.), *Hamikra bire'i mefarshav: Sefer zikkaron le-Sarah Kamin* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994) pp. 453–59.
12. Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).
13. See the discussion in Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*, pp. 107–109, and the works cited there. See also M. Greenberg, *Al ha-mikra ve-al ha-yahadut* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984) pp. 275–76.
14. See E. Lawee, "Don Isaac Abarbanel: Who Wrote the Books of the Bible?" *Tradition* 30 (1996) pp. 65-73. Cf. Joseph Kara to I Samuel 9:9.
15. See U. Simon, "Ibn Ezra between Medievalism and Modernism: The Case of Isaiah XL–XXXIV," *Congress Volume, Salamanca 1983 (Vetus Testamentum Supl, 36; Leiden 1985)* pp. 257–71.

16. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) pp. 19–28.
17. On this topic see: M. Avioz, "When was the First Temple destroyed, according to the Bible?" *Biblica* 84 (2003) pp. 562-65; Idem, "The Date of the Destruction of the First Temple in Ancient Versions and in Early Biblical Interpretation," *Textus* 22 (2005) pp. 87-94.
18. M. Greenberg, "To Whom and for What Should a Bible Commentator Be Responsible?" *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 10A (1990) pp. 29–38.
19. *Minhagei Yisrael*, 7 Vols. (Jerusalem, 1989–2003).
20. See Moshe J. Bernstein, "The Orthodox Jewish Scholar and Jewish Scholarship: Duties and Dilemmas," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 3 (1991-1992) pp. 8–36 at 24 (emphasis added).



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The *Da'at Miqra* (Hebrew: דאָט מיַקראַ) is a series of volumes of Hebrew-language biblical commentary published by the Jerusalem-based Mossad Harav Kook and constitutes a cornerstone of contemporary Israeli Orthodox bible scholarship. The project was headed by Yehuda Kiel, who received the Israel Prize for his part in the enterprise.

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Overview[]

The singularity of *Da'at Miqra* lies in its combination of a traditional outlook and the findings of modern research.

Michael Avioz, "The Da'at Mikra Commentary Series: Between Tradition and Criticism", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34 (2006), pp. 226-236. Online copy at <https://www.academia.edu>. CC©.