

איכפא דאמר

A Student Journal of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America

Volume III, Number 2

April 1981/Nisan 5741

SCHOLARSHIP AND THEOLOGY

Steven Rubenstein • Shaye J. D. Cohen

ON INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Chanan Alexander • Paul Kerbel •

Robert Dobrusin

LETTERS/BOOK REVIEW

Is History Only for Apikorsim?

Shaye J.D. Cohen

There are four areas where we modern historians might come into conflict with ourselves as loyal rabbinic Jews. First, and most obviously, we will be led to doubt the literal veracity of stories and events, recounted either in the Bible or in the Talmud. The Bible says such and such happened. But because you're a fancy historian with a Ph.D., you know that this is either implausible or improbable or contradicts something written somewhere else. It's in a late source, it's unreliable, it's folk tradition, etc., etc. This conflict surfaces most often with reference to miracles. We moderns, of course, refuse to believe in them. We posit that for someone to strike a rock and water to come out of it is something which is inherently implausible, unless you rationalize it. There's a hidden stream under the rock. When Elijah threw whatever it was into the water to sweeten it, he didn't know what it was, but we may suggest that it was sodium bicarbonate, or whatever was chemically required to take the poison out of the water.

This approach has a very long and distinguished history to it, both for Jews with regard to the Bible and Talmud, and for Christians when it came to New Testament miracles. One had only to rationalize everything which was perceived in antiquity as miraculous, but to assert that in reality these events do adhere to the natural order. They were perceived as defying the natural order, but the actual events involved do not in any way violate the natural law. This is a standard approach, but again we moderns intuitively feel, I think, that all of these things are patently unbelievable. When it says in the Talmud that Rabbi So-and-So created a man that could get up and walk around, or when two Rabbis created a calf which they then proceeded to eat for their dinner, we dismiss these as folk legends without much veracity to them. It is historical study which leads you to doubt the truth of miracles.

Further, we deny one basic assumption of rabbinic study: the fundamental unity of the Bible. Since all parts of the Bible are true, one section can be reconciled with another. There are no contradictions which are left hanging. All the Bible is one. Modern historians say, "It ain't so." If the Bible says "A" here and "B" there, don't try to reconcile them. You may have two different

versions of the same story, you may have parallel versions, contradictory versions, or whatever. The fundamental assumptions of modern study and rabbinic study are different. Dr. Halivni, as you know, is working on this very assumption, that you should not try to reconcile what the Gemara tries to reconcile. Contradictory sources should be left contradictory. This fundamental premise of modern historical study challenges the assumption of the rabbinic method of study and of rabbinic texts themselves. Thus, rabbinic Jews believe in the homogeneity and literal veracity of the Bible and to a great extent, of Rabbinic texts, but we moderns do not.

The second basic assumption of all modern historians is that you do not involve God in history. God may or may not exist. But even if God does exist, God does not play an active role in human events. Once you assume that the divine plays an active role in history, then of course, all historical study is meaningless. Then anything, the most absurd, the most irrational, the most crazy, the most inexplicable events can all be explained in the one statement, "God wanted it that way"-- end of discussion. It looks dumb, it looks silly, it looks impossible, it looks implausible, but so what? God wanted it that way and that's what happened and who are you to argue, and that's the end of it."

A modern historian who works on any period of human history makes two working hypotheses. First, he posits that God doesn't exist for all practical purposes. He posits that people believe in a God, that this belief will cause them to do things. That is undoubtedly true and only a fool would ignore that. A sociologist has to account for the fact that people believe in God and will do things because they believe in God. He himself, however, in his reconstruction will not allow his belief in God, if he has one, to get in the way. It is completely pushed aside. You assume God does not exist, but even if God does exist you assume He's the clockmaker who built the clock, wound it up and then sits back and watches what happens -- in the classic 18th century deistic fashion. If you deny either of these assumptions, if you say that God takes an active, day to day role in human events, then modern historical study collapses, for to talk about economic factors, political forces, social forces, military forces, etc. is then meaningless. There is a fundamental tension between a critical historian and any religious person, whether Jewish, Christian or any person who believes in an active God who controls history. In his treatment of miracles,

the critical historian will say that God did not send down boulders from heaven, God did not strike down the first born dead in one night. True, God could do these things, but He didn't and doesn't do these things. This is the fundamental assumption that a modern historian makes.

Suppose in a court case someone would come along and claim he's not responsible for an action he did -- after all, God wanted him to do it. We don't listen to that. We look into the facts. Was he drunk at the time? Was he not drunk? Was he in control? Did he do it on purpose? Did he not do it on purpose? Was he guilty or not guilty? We don't talk about God's will. We just ignore it. We don't care, but look at other things. You look for the motivations, for evidence, for proof. You do an historical study in a courtroom. You don't ask yourself in the court if God made the man pull the trigger (in which case God is guilty). You assume that whatever divine force controls the world, did not take an active role in human events to influence the outcome of this man's actions in this particular circumstance. He himself is responsible for whatever he did. Whatever God did, well that's God's business -- that we don't care about. That's an assumption we make, a legal assumption. If we don't make that assumption, there would be complete legal chaos. The assumption we make in court is the assumption a historian makes. The task of the historian is the same as that of a judge and jury: to reconstruct what happened.

At this point we may wish to make a subtle distinction. You could say from day to day, from Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, God doesn't really do anything, but from the perspective of month to month or year by year, decade by decade, millennium by millennium, there we can detect the hand of God in history, in larger forces, larger issues, larger development. This may be true, but you must put the horse before the cart. Only after fiddling with the statistics, analyzing his sources and reconstructing the past, will the historian adopt a religious posture and say in his last chapter, in his epilogue, "From my reconstruction, we now see the hand of God in history." He does not do the reverse and begin with God's will. Only in the epilogue, the end, does he say: Now we understand the way God controls human events. The first 300 pages are completely devoid of that assumption and that religious talk, because there he's working with the assumption that God is somewhere in left field and not actively involved.

The old problem which I want to avoid here is the paradox of God's role. On the one hand, man has free will, and on the other hand, God is omniscient and omnipotent. How can the two be reconciled? We have not discovered the problem here in this room. It has been discussed once or twice before. If you assign absolute free will, which is what judge and jury assume in a court and a historian assumes in his study, you are therefore responsible for everything you do. By accepting this assumption you thereby assert at the same time whatever role God plays at all is quite minimal. Free will is absolute; therefore, man is responsible for what happens and we may talk about motives and economic forces and social forces and this and that. It makes sense to talk about these things because the will of God is irrelevant. This is of course the fundamental tension between a historian and any religious person. For a religious person, history means the study of God's control of human events.

A fundamental assumption of historical study is a product of the 19th century and specifically of a man named Ferdinand Christian Baur. He was the first one to say point blank, even in the study of Christianity, that you don't worry about God and the will of Jesus, that you reconstruct history in human terms. You attempt to understand the political, the social and economic forces, and in the end you worry about God in history. You do not start off with the New Testament as the revealed word of God. Baur was denounced and thrown out of various clerical circles, the usual reaction of an establishment to free thinking brilliant persons (Baur was somewhat anti-Semitic, too, but that's another matter). His view is now absolutely triumphant in historical study. The only place I think you would find this not to be the case, would be in quarters you and I would consider to be quite medieval -- that is, groups which accept every single word of their holy scripture (whether the Tanach, the Talmud or the New Testament or the Church Fathers) as absolute "gospel" truth. You and I intuitively feel that a historian can't work that way; it's just impossible.

My first two points are closely connected. The religious person believes that God takes an active role in human affairs and has given to man a homogeneous book (or books) which document this supervision. The critical historian denies these beliefs. For the believer there is "absolute truth," not so for the historian. I would like to expand briefly on this point (and I refer you to What is History? by E. H. Carr). You and I would like to think there's a

difference between these historical statements: Columbus discovered America in 1492; and, the European rebellion of 1848 was caused by the uprising of the proletariat against the oppressive upper classes. You and I intuitively would like to think that one is a fact and the other an interpretation. But in reality, as Carr shows, they're both on the same level. Each one represents your perception of a past event and neither one could be absolutely wrong nor absolutely right. History does not exist outside the mind of the historian. There's no objective truth. $E = MC^2$ is perhaps, an absolute truth, which if Einstein hadn't discovered, someone else would have discovered, five years later, ten years later, whatever. But art and history are objective. If Da Vinci hadn't painted the Mona Lisa, no one else would have painted it. If Salo Baron hadn't written his Social and Religious History of the Jews, no one else would have written history in that same way. It would have been different. Even someone else who knew as much as Baron wouldn't have produced the same work. It would have been different, because it's subjective. But the religious person does believe in absolute historical truth.

There are two other areas of possible tension between modern historical study and Rabbinic Judaism. A Rabbinic Jew interprets all of Jewish history as rabbinic history, from Moses, through a string of Rabbis, down to today. The historian of Rabbinic Judaism, however, does not accept this interpretation. We automatically look for pluralism, different expressions, different varieties of Judaism. The Sadducees weren't so terrible after all. Even the Karaites weren't so terrible. They had a few intelligent people among them who wrote some pretty good pieces and made some valuable observations. If you ask a modern historian, he will readily admit that they were very good Biblical scholars. They knew quite a good deal and they scored quite a few points against their Rabbinic adversaries. If you ask any modern student that he'll concede as much. If, on the other hand, you ask a rosh yeshiva that question and you'll get a string of expletives.

We moderns do not share this Rabbinic bias. We are Rabbinic Jews in the sense that our Judaism which we either love or hate, which we have to grapple with every day of our lives, is Rabbinic Judaism in one way or another. And yet we don't share the assumption of Rabbinic Judaism that all Jewish history is Rabbinic history. The Sadducees are a group with their own values which have to be understood and discussed. You just can't reject them.

This attitude prevails among Conservative scholars and Reform scholars who emphasize throughout the pluralism of the Jewish past. In fact, there never was a monumental monism of any kind in the Jewish experience, and there always were conflicting groups even within the Rabbinic movement itself. We are already accustomed to such pluralism. But we can see how self-avowed Orthodox individuals could distrust such an attitude.

Consider Itzak Isaac HaLevy who wrote his Dorot haRishonim in the late 19th and early 20th century. He was a right wing orthodox historian who wrote in Hebrew. He fills about 300 pages of polemic against Geiger's interpretation of the Sadducees. What did Geiger say about the Sadducees that was so horrible as to require 300 pages of refutation? Geiger tried to show that the Sadducees were a nationalist group looking out for the best interests of the people, that they were really aristocrats doing their best job, that they had the support of the people for many centuries until they gradually became encrusted as an upper class group and lost contact with the masses. But until that point the Pharisees and everyone else supported them as the national leaders of the people. They had a program which was, for a while, fully legitimate. Their mistake was to fall behind the times. But this, of course, is in the eyes of HaLevy impossible. The Sadducees, the national leaders of the Jews? Impossible! The Sadducees in control? Can you imagine such a thing? These anti-Rabbinic Jews?

The venom of a fundamentalist Jew comes out in HaLevy's pages. Even though he's allegedly talking about the Sadducees, it's obvious he's talking about something else, because for him to legitimize any non-Rabbinic form of Judaism means you can legitimize Reform. This is a problem which we Conservative Jews ought not to feel. We emphasize religious pluralism in Jewish history. This is one of the leitmotifs of Conservative historiography. Today we argue that even Israeli Judaism should be pluralistic. Jewish history was never monistic. There never was a central rabbinic authority which had predominant or exclusive control. Never! Ever since Abraham and Lot quarrelled, Jewish history has always had disputes, and there was never a single time in Jewish history when there was a unanimty on anything, let alone in the Rabbinic movement. How Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel were both call Rabbinic Jews, is sometimes beyond me. It is doubtful if they could eat a meal together or inter-marry with each other. Such is the pluralism of Rabbinic Judaism.

Related to acceptance of the contribution of non-Rabbinic Judaism is the use of non-Rabbinic sources for the study of history. How can you go ahead and read all these historians? You should be studying Talmud and not diaries, chronicles, Greek and Roman historians, or whatever! For us Conservative Jews, this problem of non-Rabbinic sources is not as strong a problem as for others.

My final point. Extreme right-wing Jews (I'm avoiding the word, "Orthodox," because I think it's a very bad term), would agree that Rabbinic Judaism is the same in the Bible, the same in the Talmud, the same in the Shulchan Aruch, and the same in modern times being one long string of rabbis back to Sinai. To them, it is one long continuum. It is, as Samson Raphael Hirsch calls it, "Judaism eternal." It is something eternal -- above history in many ways.

We moderns feel that history means development, history means change, history means that the Judaism in the Bible is not the same as the Judaism of the Talmud. The Bible is the Bible, and the Talmud is the Talmud. One evolves into the other. Judaism is an ever-changing concatenation of circumstances, of beliefs, practices outside forces, outside influences, inside forces, inside influences, politics, etc. It's dynamic; it changes in the course of time. The a-historical Judaism advocated by some, at least theoretically, is indefensible to the modern mind. That something can remain static over the course of millenia is, for us, an impossibility.

Thus, of our four problems only two remain. The historian questions the veracity of sacred texts and adopts an agnostic (or atheistic or deistic) stance. How can this be squared with Rabbinic Judaism? Let me attempt to formulate an answer by asking a question. Do Rabbinic Jews study history? The answer is no. Rabbis in the Talmud did not write a history book. Rabbis in the Talmud never wrote anything on history. They never wrote a continuation of the Book of Chronicles, or of the Book of Kings. They never wrote a history of their own time. They never wrote a history of the previous times, of the Second Temple period, for example. Rabbis of the Talmudic period wrote Mishnah and Midrash. The earliest history books, in any real sense Jewish history, come along in the Middle Ages. And even there you study history because you want to understand Gemarah. Did Rabbi Akiva come before Rabbi Yishmael, or were they contemporaries? Did they come before

Yehuda HaNasi? So for that you list the generations of rabbis, which is what Abraham ibn Daud did in Sefer Hakabbalah. You want to understand the Talmud.

On that level, history is simply an aid to studying the Talmud. It's "historical" study after a fashion, but until well into the 16th century these lists were considered ancillary to Talmud study. The major focus of Jewish historiography was to talk about the rabbis, about when they lived and what they wrote. Jewish historiography was simply a string of short biographies, if you like. But you didn't study history as such. Why not? Some medieval rabbis bluntly state not to bother with history. Why? They cite the famous phrase, "Mai dehava hava." "Whatever happened happened." It's all over, who cares? This phrase appears many times in the Tosafot. Why, they say, would you waste time and brain-power on stupid questions? Even the Rambam (Maimonides) in the Perush Ha-Mishnayot says that studying history is a waste of time.

I think the reason is provided in the Rabbinic attitude to Bible-study. Instead of studying history, the Rabbis studied the Bible. The Bible is a holy book, the Bible is a book which is inspired, the Bible is a book about God and Israel and the world and history. Once we get beyond the Biblical period, we don't know what we have anymore. There is no Ruach Hakodesh (Holy Spirit). There are no Prophets. We don't understand the way Providence works anymore. We have no Divine explanations of why the Temple was destroyed. So the Rabbis didn't speculate. They'd rather go back to something which was strong and secure -- and that was the Bible. In the Bible, there are people whom they knew to have spoken to God, whom they knew to be saying something which is true for all time, not only for their own time, but for all time. Even innocent stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not just little stories, but paradigms for all the generations, for all eternity. For centuries the Rabbinic Jew thought along these lines: "I'll study those events, those stories and those prophecies and that will explain to me the human condition. I won't study the Roman Empire. That's irrelevant. What's that going to tell me? I'd much rather study Esau stories in Genesis. I don't understand what God's doing nowadays. I'd much rather study Genesis. By understanding Jacob and Esau, I understand how Jews will get along with the Romans. I'd rather study Isaiah than

predict social and economic forces. I'd rather study the prophecies of Isaiah, because they're true." This attitude of our forebearers continues, to some extent, even today, every Shabbat, when the rabbi tries to connect the contemporary events with the weekly sidrah. He's taking the Bible as a paradigm of contemporary events.

This explanation was first suggested by Nahum Glatzer in his German book, Untersuchungen zur Geschichtstehre der Tannaiten. Above I gave you the thesis of the book with a few elaborations. I think he explains well the lack of interest in historical study on the part of the Rabbis, and of all Judaism down to the modern period. Our Rabbis admitted that, after the Biblical period, they did not know what God was doing in history. This admission is very close to the attitudes of Modern historians. We're not violating any canon of Rabbinic Judaism, at least as far as the post-Biblical period is concerned. The Rabbis themselves tacitly admit that we don't know what God is doing in history; and, in effect, have left us, theologically, a free hand. We're not given a theological interpretation of post-Biblical history by the Rabbis. Nowhere is that done. But in Christianity the situation is different. And that's why Baur, whom I mentioned before, ran into so much trouble with the Church, because the Church says the theological interpretation of history is still valid down through the modern period. When Baur came along and denied that, he questioned a fundamental assumption of Christianity. When he questioned the historical Christ, he struck at the foundation of the edifice of Christian dogma.

But in Judaism this is not the case. There's much less at stake in Judaism. The problem of the historian and the believer is really, as far as I see it, a Christian problem more than a Jewish problem. The Christian has a much greater stake in the theological interpretation of history than a Rabbinic Jew does. A Rabbinic Jew simply has no creed by which to abide in the theological study of sacred history. He has no sacred history. Once the Biblical canon is closed, sacred history is over and everything is left open. Therefore, we moderns are left, by the tradition itself, with a free hand to do whatever we want to do in it, in a sense that we do not have any theology to worry about. We're on our own. Now you're free to put your theology in your epilogue of your book. So the fundamental tension between historian and believer is eased once the Bible is closed. As a Rabbinic scholar, I can leave that tension to Bible scholars.