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The Bible Is a Guide to Mankind, Not to God

The Bible can be read or studied in many ways. One way that I have found most helpful and meaningful is suggested in the writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The latter encapsulates it by saying that the Bible should be viewed not as a guide for man's theology but rather as God's anthropology. I shall explain this and illustrate its importance, at least for me. Most often people search the pages of the Bible for insights about God. These are rare, if they exist at all. For reasons known best to Him, He denied us this information. Moses tried to elicit from Him more details, perhaps even certainty. He failed to get what he wanted. Therefore, we would do well not to regard the Bible as a textbook for man's theology. It was not given to us for that purpose.

Our theology will continue to be based on faith and details are about as conclusive as all guesswork. We will delineate attributes; we will argue for and against corporeality; we will try to rationalize the existence of evil - the so-called problem of the theodicy. However, no one - not even the greatest of men - has provided the ultimate answers. Apparently, God wanted not only Moses to be frustrated in this regard but all of mankind forever.

It may be intellectually challenging, even exciting, to philosophize and theologize, but let us reconcile ourselves to the one inescapable truth: God is beyond understanding. And the Bible was not given to us to solace Him within our understanding. Yes, to place Him within our reach but not within our conceptual grasp. Therefore, let us not use the Bible in a way that it was never intended to serve.

Wherefore, then, was the Bible given to us? Not that we might fathom how to view God but rather that we might fathom how God views us, how God views man.

In a conversation that it was my privilege to have had with (the late) Professor Heschel, I told him how much this insight meant to me - how many passages of the Torah it illuminated for me. He asked me to spell it out and I have the feeling that he was grateful to me for the specifics I provided.

Is the Bible clear on what God's design was for the trees in the Garden of Eden? Do the commentaries agree on any one position? Is there not much mystery about what God intended? Of course. But the Bible does not reveal. What does it reveal? Not what God had in His mind but rather how man reacted.

Adam had the perfect world. He was denied virtually nothing. Yet he would not be content and restrain himself. He had to flout God's will. This is how Adam - or all men - react in similar situations. The Bible is telling us how God sees us, how we behave. Our greed is simply our ruin. This the Bible wants us to know.

Then comes the second mystery. Why did God prefer the offering of Abel to that of Cain? Everything the commentaries say about this is based on the flimsiest evidence, on conjecture. These are trying to fill in where God chose to be silent. But again the Bible wants us to know how man reacts. Cain is the symbol of humanity. He cannot fight God; instead he kills his brother. The Bible is mirroring man. It is giving us a reflection of what we are like.

One turns similarly to the story of the flood and the Tower of Babel. Here God's behavior is made reasonably clear. But it is the behavior of man that remains the focal point of the story. God brought the flood because the race of man had become corrupt. Did man learn a lesson? Not at all. Instead of improving the social order and making it a just one, man seeks to build into the skies and frustrate God from repeating His performance.

The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are also not clearly identified in the Bible. The rabbis tried to fill in the empty spaces. But how Abraham reacted to the news that God was about to destroy the cities is one of the most magnificent chapters of the Bible. The contrast between Noah and Abraham is dramatic; Noah, when told about the impending flood, is content to save himself and his loved ones. Abraham, on the other hand, challenges God in an attempt to save the cities. Again what the Bible is teaching principally is not how God operates but rather how man ought to react.

Especially was Professor Heschel pleased with what I had to say about one of the most difficult problems in Jewish philosophy. How could God have punished Pharaoh if God Himself had hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh would not free his Hebrew slaves? Again the answer is: The hardening of the heart is simply a description of the typical human being - and a typical monarch - stubbornly resistant to God's message, unable to do what is good for his own subjects because his personal pride stands in the way.

All of this came to my mind this past summer as I continued to read and hear of the reactions of all of mankind to the significant, historic performance of the people of Israel in Lebanon. One must ponder the reactions and thereby learn much about human nature.

I know that I have learned much about the nature of my fellow men, the nature of many of my colleagues, the nature of the Jewish intelligentsia, and the nature of so-called liberal humanitarians and universalists.