

## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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The Modern Spirit, 1980.

The Modern Spirit Daniel Jeremy Silver December 28, 1980

I attended a civic banquet a few days ago where the toastmaster, for reasons best known to himself, told the old chestnut of the Religious School student who came home one Sunday. His parents asked him what he had studied that day. He told him that he had studied about the flight of the Israelites and the pursuit of the Egyptians, and they asked him to tell them more of the detail and he told his parents that when the Israelites had fled Egypt six hundred thousand strong the Israel flight commanders had made sure that the eighteen fighter planes were protecting them overhead and that when the Israelites had come to the Reed Sea the Corps of Engineers had built a pontoon bridge across the sea and the sappers had mined the bridge so that the Israelites were able to cross on dry land and when the Egyptians were on the sea the pontoon bridge was exploded and that ended the pursuit. And the parents were supposed to have asked, is that the way you were really told and taught; and the youngster answered, no, but you really wouldn't believe what they told us. Well, he received the laughter that I received, polite, it's an old story, and I decided on my sermon for today.

Why is it that we repeat in the synagogue these old stories that even a twelve-year old finds improbable, implausible, impossible to believe? It happens that this week in synagogues across the world we begin the book of Exodus, the story of the flight, and so the theme was in my mind and as I began to revolve it about a bit I suddenly found myself here, standing in the pulpit last Sunday morning, remember I confessed to you then that I really didn't know what I was going to speak about this morning, and so I announced the theme, the modern mood, and I warned you that almost anything could fit into that theme. As I began to think about the Exodus and plausibility, our reactions to this child's tale, I thought of this simple truth, that a generation ago had I spoken about the theme of what can we believe about the Bible, why do we bother reading these old stories, I probably would have thought in terms of the modern mood and assumed that the twelve-year old represented that mood, the

modern mood being a no-nonsense, no patience with tradition, the implausibility of miracles, no interest in history, let's be on with the present and the future. It was assumed then that faith in Bible stories was limited to the backwoods and the back ways of American life, and that as education spread its gentle blessings across the land people would generally come to the idea that these were fairy tales and dismiss them or read them for whatever the fairy tale and the myth was worth.

But you know, standing here in 1980 thinking about this theme, I became more and more convinced there's no one the modern mood but there are modern moods. Who would have believed a generation ago that across our land millions of people would make the Bible again not only the most bought book but the most read book; that millions of people would spend a great deal of time trying to prove or to themselves, to their own satisfaction, that the Bible is literally true, that the Bible Belt would have spread to cover in many ways the country. Who would have believed that issues of theology would have risen again across the land? We were moving towards, we thought, an era when a gentle liberalism would replace the narrow parochial theologies of the past. And yet here we are in the 1980's and people are saying that God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews. And here we are in the 1980's and I ask my Confirmation class this year, as I have in many years, whether any of them had ever been missionarized and I discovered to my surprise that over half of them raised their hands, that either in their junior high schools or in the shopping centers someone had come to them with a Bible in the hand as a symbol of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the standard of truth, and tried to convince them on the basis of some very carefully selected verses that beginning with God and the Ten Commandments and going to the Christ and the promise of Christian redemption that they ought to see the gospel light.

It's not true, as we once thought, that there is a modern mood which will slowly but inevitably spread across the earth. Liberals once believed that as prosperity and technology spread across the earth, as the backward nations emerged and began to develop modern economies, the kind of respect for constitutional government, for free-dom which we have in this country would inevitably become the aspiration of all countries and all peoples; and yet we've seen in the Third World there's really very little aspiration for freedom or for constitutional democracy. Autocracy and oligarchy are the ways of government and more than this, the Third World governments are trying to pass resolutions through the UNESCO and other groups that the free press such as we know it ought not to be free in the sense that we mean it but free to teach the truth, to promote progress, and not to print what they find objectionable even if it be fact.

And who would have believed that in the year 1980 fundamentalism, literalism, Bible belief as such, had won for itself so many millions of adherents who have graduated from high school and graduated from college and presumably understand the world of which we are a part.

And so I approached this theme in a more complex way than I might have a generation ago. There are two questions implicit in it: the first, how can a twelve-year old or a twenty-two year old or a seventy-two year old believe the Bible. Is the Bible fact or fiction? Is it history or myth? Is it God's word or is it a great bit of classic literature? And secondly, if the Bible is neither what the twelve-year old liberals believed, a collection of fairy stories or what the literalists believed, the inerent truth, how do we decide, to find a place between those two poles which would help us understand what the Bible represents. And I'd like to approach this question with you from, of course, a traditional Jewish perspective. What do I believe about the Bible? Well, in many ways I believe what Jews have always believed.

I remind you this book, the Holy Scriptures, bound as a single volume, has never been treated as a single volume by our Jewish people. The Bible was called not the Holy Scriptures but the tenach, and the tenach is not a volume title but an acronym made up of three words, Torah, le'vim ketubim, the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings. Originally the 39 books which comprise this anthology were separate scrolls and Jews never looked upon all of the scrolls as equally inspired,

equally revealed. The Torah we keep in the Ark. The Torah is more sacred than any of the other parts of Scripture. Ne'vim, ketuvim, the Prophets and the Holy Writings represent inspired materials but not necessarily God's word. They represent literature as well as wisdom. The rabbis were quite prepared to say He never was, never was created, it's entirely a book of fiction. They were quite prepared to say that much of the material in the book of Ecclesiastes had Solomon not spoken this material it was not worthy to be included in Scripture. To be included in the Biblical canon meant nothing more than the book was deemed to be useful for liturgy, usable as part of public worship. And as late as the second century of the Common Era the sages wer still debating whether books like Esther or Ecclesiastes or the Song of Songs should be included in that list. They were not debating whether these books were the word of God but whether there was sufficient value to them to be included as part of public worship. It is only of Torah, that is of the Five Books of Moses, that Jews said this is the word of God. And even when they turned to the scroll which we keep in our ark to the Torah they approached it not fundamentally, fundamentalistically, not literally, but in a very sophisticated and many-tiered way. The rabbis said, as an example, the Torah speaks in the language that people will understand, language which is not meant to be taken in its entirety literally but is to be taken as suggestive of deeper ideas, of deeper wisdom, of more profound thoughts. The Lord, the Bible says, spoke unto Moses saying. Now the sages said God doesn't speak, God has no mouth, that's not what is meant. What is meant is that suddenly men working through the moral and spiritual ideas of the day had a sense they understood a truth which had not been understood before. How else but using our language, the language of speech, could we make clear, suggest, the theme which was obviously involved? They said also, there is no sense of chronology to the Torah story, it's not to be taken as a purely literal history of the events that it describes. It's a

to be taken as a purely literal history of the events that it describes. It's a book of wisdom. It's God's word, and in that sense God is trying to shape a special message to the Jewish people. And one is to relate all parts of the Bible to each

other so that the whole makes a seamless sense of truth and of understanding.

And finally, they argue that Torah was a continuum, it's not simply the text itself but all of the interpretations that have emerged out of the text. And so, for instance, the text permits capital punishment, but over years, as you know, the tradition of our people was to use techniques of due process to make capital punishment almost nonenforceable. Does that mean that the rule of capital punishment was wrong?

No, it's valid and true for a particular case, but the more important reverence for life, the theme that we are not to play God, to take life, that theme is more important ultimately because — the seamless sense of the Torah shapes the meaning which we derive from it.

Finally, there's a sense in which the Torah is to be understood as illustrative of the facts of our own lives. We are to apply to it our own understanding and not simply take from it what others have understood before. Each generation is to read. Each generation is to study and to interpret. And the interpretation, no generation precludes or preempts the ability of another generation to find within the text things of value and of meaning.

The word, paradise, comes from the Persian, the Hebrew form is pardais, which is also the word, incidentally, that is used in modern Israel for an orchard. Paradise, the garden of all delights, is an idea which obviously can be related to Torah, the garden of all intellectual, spiritual delights, and the rabbi said that each of the letters of the word pardais suggest one of the levels by which the Torah is to be interpreted. The p stands for peshot, the simple meaning, that which it seems to be saying on the surface. The doled stands for dorash, the illustrative meaning, the imaginative meaning, the meaning which we derive as we expand the text, give it fuller shape than it otherwise has. Remes stands for the metaphorical meaning, the allegorical meaning, the poetic meaning, the reading below the text, reading into the idea what it seems to suggest rather than what is said on the surface.

And finally, sod, the samach, stands for secret, the esoteric meaning, the meanings

within meanings that one could not find by reading the text itself but must have a special oral understanding in order to appreciate it.

And if we were to take the story that this child did not understand and felt was so implausible, the story of the flight and the pursuit that I read to you this morning, we can find all of these meanings illustrated right there simply in the text. The peshot, Israel escapes, Egypt pursues, God splits the waters, Israel passes dry shod, the waters return over the horse and the chariot of Egypt. That's the simple story, and literally it's implausible. It's a miracle story. We moderns have trouble with miracles, at least this kind. But if we look at this simple story, at the peshot, what do we see? We see a very clear attempt by the ancient writer to indicate that the Jews did not achieve their freedom on their own, through their own strategims and through their own efforts unaided by God. In the ancient world slaves simply didn't make it into freedom. If a few broke away they were mercilessly pursued because a slave-owning economy cannot allow slaves to escape and make good their escape, otherwise, since there are always tens upon tens of slaves for every one slave master, there could be no security to that kind of society. Yet, Israel made good its freedom and this could not have been except the redemptive power of God. So on the reshot level, on the simple level, there is the theme of God's aid to those who seek their freedom.

And on the dorash level, the level of the illustration of the story, how it's embellished over time; you remember in the story how the Israelites sensed the pursuit and they turn—against Moses and Moses prays to God and God says to Moses essentially, enough prayer, be out and doing? The rabbis took this theme, this enough prayer, be out and doing, and enlarged on it, dorash, and they said the seas did not part immediately. Israel had to march out from the shore into the waters and the first ranks that come to the point where the water was up to their chin, before the waters parted, and they were able to pass through. Why? Because we must be partners with God in the work which is the work of history. We can't simply sit back, fold

our hands and pray for success, for deliverance, for the things we want. We must show God that we're willing to risk lives, risk ourselves, risk effort to achieve our end before God will support, encourage that which we are seeking.

And on the level of remes, on the level of suggestion and on the level of metaphor, what can we make of this story? We can make a great deal. You remember how just before the Israelites crossed night comes down, the pillar of cloud which led the Israelites reverses itself and stands between the Egyptians and the Israelites, darkness separating the people so that the passage can take place at night? Night, night was the time of deliverance, the time when God is somehow closer to man. On Pesach night we call it the night of watching. The deliverance from Egypt took place at night, the crossing of the Reed Sea takes place at night, escape takes place under the cover of night. You hide, in a sense, the things that you seek until you have achieved them. And on that level there's a simple practical truth that until you have worked out the things that you want it's not wise to broadcast them. Until you have managed to work through your research it's not wise to tell others what you're doing lest they preempt your own undertaking. In a mystical sense Israel expected deliverance to take place at night.

And on the sense of sod, the sense of the secret, the esoteric, you know that Hebrew has no numeration system. We use the alphabet as the numerals, aleph is one, bet is two, gimel is three, and so on. And what the rabbis did was simply to add up the number of the letters and the lines which promise redemption or describe the redeeming moment at the Reed Sea and they might add to 1,666 and they would proclaim this to be the year of redemption.

They read the Torah not as the twelve-year old did once, quickly, finding it totally impractical and implausible, but they read the Torah at so many levels and they saw in each level the things which were immediate to them, relevant to their lives, valuable as insights, valuable as theology.

So one of the ways a Jew faces the Torah is to recognize within it a multi-

dimension volume, and it is that capacity, I think, which has allowed Jews in all ages to return to it and find in it meaning. And here, of course, is what the Torah suffers from in modern times. We're a hot-rod generation. We skim over, and if something doesn't make sense to us the first time we put it aside, we dismiss it as irrelevant, as meaningless. If you look at an old text of the Tanach you'd find a line of Bible, some book, and you would find it surrounded by commentary and super-commentary and commentaries on the super-commentary, pages and pages of commentary for every line of the text. But that only begins to answer the question. It suggests what Jews of the past found in Scripture. It suggests that it was not to them the simple fairy story that the twelve-year old child felt it to be.

In the nineteenth century a new challenge arose. People had ceased, really, to believe in revelation. They no longer believe that Moses received the whole five books of Moses whole, from God, during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Until that time most everybody within the Jewish community and most outside the Jewish community had agreed that this had been one unitary revelation. But now people began to say how could Moses have written about his own death; or why is it that a text includes the phrase, on the other side of the Jordan, when the place referred to is in Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan and Moses never crossed into the Promised Land. They began to see as they read the Scripture that it was filled with inconsistencies. We all know about Noah's Ark. Many of us dismiss it as a fairy tale. We remember the animals coming in two by two. There are also indications in the story of another Noah's Ark's story where the animals come in seven by seven. And if you look closely at the first chapters of Genesis you realize that the famous Creation story of six days of creation and a day of rest is immediately followed by another Creation story which seems to indicate a ten-stage creation rather than one which required only the six days.

As people began to pull the Torah apart a new problem arose, a problem which went to the very heart of the traditional Jewish faith. It was a matter of doctrine,

a matter of belief, "this is the Torah which God commanded us through Moses", the whole five books. Yes, we looked at it metaphorically and allegorically and in many ways. No, the rabbis were not fundamentalists, but yes, they believed that this was a single unitary revelation given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and later.

But now modern scholarship, critical scholarship, raised doubts to this old piety and largely because of these doubts people began to pick and to choose in the Torah what was meaningful to them and what was not. People began to speak of Torah myth. They began to speak of ancient legislation which has only been incorporated whole into the Torah.

I remember taking my first class in Biblical Criticism at the university and the man who taught us was a very famous scholar and he parsed down, according to his like, the various ways in which the original material he felt had been put together. In those days there were various names to these ore documents, these founding documents, the J document, the E document, the D document and so on; and as he did this I remember thinking to myself there's nothing in what he's coming up with which at all relates to my faith, my beliefs, my way of looking at things, to Judaism. What he was presenting to us were documents which were fit and appropriate to the Bronze Age, to a thousand years or eight hundred years before the Common Era, documents which in a sense were time-sealed and made to give some light unto ancient Israelite practice, but really gave no light to how these old documents somehow became Torah and how Torah became our Torah, the central symbol of all that we hold sacred. It's almost like taking a biopsy, taking a piece of living flesh and freezing it so that you could examine it. They were freezing these documents in time, forcing us to look at these documents as if they were time-limited and not documents which had any sense of eternal vitality to them.

Over the years I have come to understand that this scholar was right in his own way, that there is a legitimate task to be done in taking the Torah document and parsing it back to its original parts, but that doesn't complete the task. I have two

Bibles. One is an old worn Hebrew Tanach which I keep in my desk. I've pencilled into the margin all manner of comments which scholars and academics and medievals and what not have made which I found interesting and relevant. It's a two-tiered book, too. Some of these comments go back to the critical method which I accept. Some of them go back to the commentators of our tradition with insights which I also accept. Then there's the Torah which we keep in our Ark from which we read, I read, from time to time. I would never dare mark anything in the margin of the Torah. The Torah represents to me the symbol of all that our tradition represents. It represents a book which is as the psalm which we sang before this sermon, Ait Hayim, a tree that is ever alive, a book full of seminal ideas. It matters not how it came together but that it is and that we continue to find within it things of value, ideas that are relevant and meaningful. We follow old forms. We read the old texts. We read them for an existential purpose because it relates immediately to the facts of our own life and our own situation.

The mystery of the Torah, the divinity of the Torah for me lies not in the fact which I no longer accept, of course, that Moses received this Torah whole. That's an impossible idea for me to believe. It lies in the fact that within this Torah there's life. Many more people in the ancient world, probably millions of people in the ancient world, read and believed the Gilgamesh epic, the great Babylonian flood story. Archeologists have found cuneiform tablets in library after library throughout the ancient Middle East, but until these archeologists unearthed the Gilgamesh epic from the earth in our generation it had been forgotten completely for nearly two thousand years. And over each of those two thousand years the Bible has remained alive and vital and seminal, able to shape the religious spirit of a people. To me the divinity of the Torah lies in its vitality, in the fact that it has this unique capacity to speak meaningfully to me, to you, to all of us, over time. It matters not so much how it came into being. It represents a meeting of mem and God. It matters not that its origins are not the simple mythic origins we once believed,

but what matters, and what matters ultimately and radically, is that I can read this story which the twelve-year old read with such condescension and feel myself inspired and my understanding deepened for ultimately what is this story of the flight from Egypt and the pursuit of the Egyptians? It's a story of life. We're all fleeing from bondage, the bondage of ignorance, the bondage of our passions, the bondage of our political situation, the bondage of our fears, the bondage of our tensions, the bondage of relationships which are not satisfying to us. We're all being pursued by our habits, by our cautions, by our timidities, by our fears, by our anxieties. We all need God's help to cross the Reed Sea to become free people, autonomous. We all pray for that. We all wonder would it not have been better if we had remained in Egypt, not striven to free ourselves and to become autonomous. It's a story which speaks to us, to all of us, if we're willing to look at it in that way. And it speaks ultimately of hope. The Israelites were bondsmen, enslaved. They won their way to freedom because God willed them to be free. God describes Himself as the Lord Who brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Ultimately there is a measure of hope implicit in life itself if we've only the courage to walk into the sea, if we've only the courage to take life in hand.

year old but with the eyes of an adult and look at it for the literature, for the wisdom, for the divinity which is represented within it, I think we'll understand why the Torah remains sacred to us, a symbol of our tradition and why the critical spirit which we must accept because truth must be accepted need not destroy for us our faith in Scripture, but only remind us of the ways in which we approach it.

I spoke of the modern tempers and tried to suggest to you this morning that the naive literalism of the past is wrong which dismissed the Torah as irrelevant. I would certainly insist that naive literalism of our time is wrong which insists that this is the inerrant word of God, it is not, but I would suggest to you that the rich living tradition of the Jewish people has made of the Torah a source of

great wisdom and that there is insight, judgment, themes there worthy of our constant occupation and our constant preoccupation.

The Torah is a tree of life to those that hold fast to it.



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