BOOK REVIEW

YONATAN KOLATCH. *MASTERS OF THE WORD: TRADITIONAL JEWISH BIBLE COMMENTARY FROM THE FIRST THROUGH TENTH CENTURIES.* VOL. I., JERSEY CITY, NJ. KTAV, 2006. NP. REVIEWED BY DAN VOGEL.

This is the first in a multi-volume project to endow the names of major biblical commentators with personality and history. It is not a hagiographical endeavor. Judging from this first volume, it is intended to place their principles of commentary in the context of their biographies and the history of their times. The origins and goals of the project are implied in the fact that they arose out of Kolatch's experience as a teacher in schools for Jewish youth with minimal or just moderate background in Judaic learning. For those who received their Jewish education in *parshat ha'shavuah* sessions, *humash* and Rashi classes, adult education courses, perhaps a year in Israel, this book is edifying and clarifying.

The author realizes that before he can attend to the personalities in the evolvement of biblical commentary, a formal foundation in the characteristics of biblical commentary is necessary. Thus, he offers a long introduction to *Parshanut HaMikrah.* But it is more; it is a veritable introduction to Judaism. It begins with axioms of Torah-learning: the Divine origin of the written Torah and the sanctification of the Oral law as nearly its equal. Thereby, he strengthens the convinced and persuades the doubtful. He then undertakes to explain why commentary is necessary and why it is a holy enterprise that is ongoing for millennia.

Now he is ready to discourse on what is *pshat, drash, midrash aggada, and midrash halacha.* He expounds upon what I can trouble close readers of the biblical text: Ambiguity, repetition, apparent (but intentional) grammatical and syntactical irregularities, and the like. The very organization of this material is truly a Godsend to those who have heard *parshanut* over the years and wondered about the differences among these approaches. The selections illustrating these approaches testify to the truism that there are 70 faces to interpretation of a biblical text. Evidently, it is very difficult to offer *pshat,* a comment on the literal meaning of the text, without crossing the line to *drash,* which intends to search for "its less obvious meaning" (p. 40).

One comes out of reading these pages with the understanding that there are many differences among the commentators and commentaries, embedded meaning after embedded meaning, but none is opposite to the basic meaning of the text (even when Rashbam complains that a comment by his grandfather Rashi, "is not so").

Kolatch's introduction engenders an idea that biblical commentary is quite democratic. Once you accept the unquestioned primacy of the text, you are almost invited to try your hand at writing a commentary on a biblical verse as a religious exercise. There is one touch of irony in this introductory material: Kolatch's illustrative selections are often quotations from classic commentators, such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra, but these luminaries do not appear until Volume 2.

Finally, we arrive at the chapters presenting biblical commentators of the First-Tenth centuries in their own right. Each chapter gives a brief historical picture and then goes into the principles and contributions of the commentator. The culmination of the chapters are selections of illustrative examples.

The first is on *Hazal*, a collective designation for the *hakhamim* (sages) who are ubiquitous in Jewish learning of every sort. Their first center was Judea, in the time of the Hasmonean monarchy and subsequent harsh foreign domination. Their next center was in Babylonia, ensconced in galut. *Hazal* set the parameters and standards of textual interpretation. They are the sages of the Talmud. Their legacy in the Gemara of a halachic life can identify a Jew anywhere, differences, traditions, customs notwithstanding. From Kolatch's exposition, we see how *Hazal* demonstrated the linkage among the biblical text, halachic extension, and Jewish living..

The chapters on *Hazal* are followed by Targumim, the Zohar, the Geonim, the Spanish linguists, and the Ba'alei Masorah. Here one learns how translations are often forms of *drash*; that the Zohar, known anecdotally as a book of esoteric Jewish philosophy dealing with the "hidden" Torah, is actually a portion by portion commentary; how the Spanish linguists tried to be *pshat* commentators; that it was the Ba'alei Masorah who formalized the reading and the intonations of the unadorned Torah script, thereby marrying *pshat* to *drash,* halachically.

Obviously, these are not the most exciting commentaries, and readers may begin to feel that the end of the chapter could have been closer to the beginning. There is a cost for thoroughness and completeness.

But the reader must pay close attention to the chapter on Saadia Gaon. Here, in Saadia's controversy with the Karites, the reader will find an insightful example of how even a *pshat*-oriented commentator is affected by the intellectual [Jewish and non-Jewish] milieu around him. By paying close attention to the selections from Saadia's commentary, one will be impressed by how Saadia is really a microcosm of Kolatch's exposition of *Parshanut Ha-Mikra.*

The author's contribution extends from the most sophisticated to the most clarifying. The readers who are still searching for knowledge and conviction will find their solutions here on their level. Scholars will be impressed and inspired by the prodigious amount of research represented in the hundreds of footnotes and bibliography entries. The less scholarly can ignore most footnotes, but look for the ones that are more than mere citations. In sum, *Masters of the Word* is a contribution whose value goes far beyond its stated intentions.

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