

A Place to Stand: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* in Dialogue with Pentateuchal Scholars and Literary Theorists

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

When Rabbi Shai Held first published his two volumes of essays entitled *The Heart of Torah*, I offered this endorsement:

Rabbi Shai Held's superbly crafted reflections on Torah texts from Genesis to Deuteronomy dazzle with insight, practical wisdom, and scholarly erudition. These essays are a model for both Jews and Christians on how to read the Bible with intellectual integrity, religious significance, a mind open to a wide array of dialogue partners, and a generous spirit that celebrates the love of God and the repair of human dignity in our world today.

The opportunity to offer a more extensive response to these two volumes has reaffirmed my appreciation for the insights that weave in and out of Held's ninety-one separate essays on the weekly Torah readings from Genesis to Deuteronomy. These essays reflect not only the beating "heart" of Torah but also the beating heart of a passionate and gifted teacher and scholar of the Bible and Jewish tradition.

As a modest contribution, I want to offer two potential critiques of Rabbi Held's model of reading Torah and then offer ways by which Held might respond to them. I imagine these two critical assessments hypothetically arising from two different scholarly approaches to interpreting the Bible. One potential critique

arises from the field of redaction-critical and source-critical studies of the Pentateuch. These scholars are focused on the tracing the history of composition of the books of Genesis-Deuteronomy. The second potential critique arises from scholars with a more literary orientation in interpreting the Bible. These scholars would place the Bible in conversation with recent trends in literary theory more broadly used to analyze all kinds of literature in comparative literature courses and the like. After summarizing these two hypothetical critiques of Held's work, I will then proceed to offer a response to each hypothetical criticism and suggest that Rabbi Held's method of Torah interpretation has a place to stand within these two scholarly approaches.

Critique #1: Pentateuchal Studies

I could imagine that a group of Pentateuchal scholars who wandered into a panel session on Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* at the annual guild meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature might raise an objection to this collection of essays on Pentateuch texts. They might argue that Rabbi Held reads too much on the surface of the final form of the biblical text of the Torah without sufficient attention to discerning the underlying sources and redactional layers. Held, they might say, does focus on a number of tensions and opposing traditions on the surface of the text, but Held overinterprets those tensions in the text as theologically or ethically meaningful and rich. Many Pentateuchal critics would say they can better explain these tensions, doublets, and contradictory traditions as signs of independent and separate voices that are earlier than the final form of the text and "beneath" the surface of the text.

The so-called neo-documentarians would identify four documentary sources as having been woven together to form the present collection of Genesis-Deuteronomy: a J (Yahwist) source, an E (Elohist) source, a D (Deuteronomic) source, and a P (Priestly) source. Alongside these four documentary sources, they argue that a later Pentateuchal redactor or sequencer whom they call "R." This Pentateuchal redactor or editor ("R") divided up the four sources and then laid out the various sections in an imperfect but sufficiently comprehensible chronological sequence extending from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Pentateuchal Redactor then added a number of mostly mechanical linking connections among the many J, E, D, and P episodes and units. The editorial rearrangements of material and connective additions, these scholars argue, contributed little in the way of theological or ethical reshaping of the biblical texts in the Torah.

It should be noted that other groups of Pentateuchal scholars do not identify as neo-documentarians. These more redaction-oriented scholars reconstruct the history of the composition of the Pentateuch as more complex than the neo-documentarians. The Pentateuch emerged through a process of multiple stages of

editing and redaction interacting with layers of Priestly and non-Priestly sections and a multi-layered Deuteronomistic tradition. For my purposes here, I will focus on the neo-documentarian perspective.

Ben Sommer is an excellent Pentateuchal scholar and a neo-documentarian. Sommer wrote a wide-ranging and thoughtful book entitled *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*.¹ As a Jewish scholar of the Bible, Sommer sought to understand his work as a Pentateuchal source critic as falling within the bounds of a faithful Jewish mode of interpreting the Bible. Sommer argued that the critically reconstructed documentary sources underlying the present form of the Pentateuch (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomistic, and Priestly sources) should be honored as separate authoritative voices included under the broad umbrella of Oral Torah. Although Oral Torah is a category typically reserved for later, post-biblical Jewish legal rabbinic interpretation (Mishnah, Gemara, Talmud and the like), Sommer proposed expanding the category of Oral Torah to include these individual Pentateuchal sources (J, E, D, P as reconstructed by modern biblical scholars) as additional authoritative voices within the Jewish Oral Torah tradition.

If I were to imagine a response from Shai Held (and noting his irenic nature), I think Held might respond that he is grateful and indebted to the careful work of source and redaction critics who do often help to identify real tensions and contradictions in the traditional final form of the Masoretic text of the Bible. Historical-critical and other disciplinary modes of inquiry can all contribute and be helpful toward a richer understanding of these texts of the Pentateuch. In his two volumes *The Heart of Torah*, Held makes numerous allusions to historical-critical scholarship on the Pentateuch. He also incorporates insights that arise from thoughtful comparisons of Torah texts with relevant texts of similar genre, theme or imagery from cultures surrounding ancient Israel.

I imagine, however, that Rabbi Held would challenge the claim made by neo-documentarian Pentateuchal scholars that “R—the Pentateuchal redactor—worked rather mechanically with his source documents. Neo-documentarians assume that R (the Redactor) simply braided together and arranged in sequence the four independent sources (JEDP) into the present form of the rough narrative sequence running from the creation stories of Genesis to the death of Moses. “R” did little editing and left behind a good number of contradictions, doublets, and tensions in the final literary form of the Pentateuch. “R” was a compiler and little else. Thus, for the neo-documentarians, the final or present surface form of the Pentateuch carries in itself little interpretive meaning. It is the four independent

1 Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

sources that underlie the Pentateuch where the real thickness of meaning lies, not the surface or final form of the text.

Here I might suppose that Rabbi Held would respond that his own dialogical, complex, and theologically and ethically rich interpretations of the *peshat* meaning of the text, in dialogue with the vast array of post-biblical rabbinic commentaries and philosophers and other voices, provide a sufficient and adequate symphony of diverse voices to create compelling readings of Torah portions. Whatever the origin and process of the formation of the final form of the text of the Pentateuch, the plain sense of the present form of the Written Torah of the Pentateuch has stood the test of time and nourished the faith and spirit of multiple generations of Jewish communities, worship, and prayer over thousands of years. In addition to the Written Torah, Rabbi Held might observe that the Jewish tradition of Oral Torah and rabbinic commentary already has an embarrassment of riches. Do we really need to expand the category of Oral Torah to include the documentary sources?

Critique #2: Literary Theory or Literary Studies and the Torah

Returning to our panel session on Held's *The Heart of Torah*, we might imagine that once the Pentateuchal scholars sit down, a scholar from the Bible and literary theory working group wanders in and raises their hand to offer their critique. "Rabbi Held," they might say,

I appreciate your careful, detailed and close reading of the surface form of the texts of the Torah. Many of us, however, are aware of the many ways in which the plain sense of the texts of Scripture have been interpreted and used in deceptive ways to support patriarchy and gender inequality, violence, and oppression against the weak and vulnerable, marginalization of outsiders, ecological devastation, the slavery of Africans, and the maintenance of existing power relationships based on class, race and ethnicity, gender, disabilities, and other differences among various groups, both ancient and modern.

This hypothetical caution is well taken and a genuine contribution of modern literary theory. Strong ideologically-focused readings, influenced in the 1970s and 1980s by Freud's psychoanalysis or Marx's historical materialism (along with the work of many other theorists), encouraged a brand of interpretation that searched for meanings in texts that were hidden, repressed, deeply buried, and in need of detection, excavation, and disclosure by an interpreter. Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), for example, advocated a strong hermeneutics of suspicion toward surface meanings of texts, urging instead attention to pairs of oppositions—present or absent, transparent or hidden, and surface and

depth.² The surface of a text is often associated with the superficial and deceptive in such readings. Any mere surface reading of a text was often considered false or oppressive when closely scrutinized, supportive only of the status quo. The suspicious literary critic unmasked the text and restored to the surface the “real” underlying history that the text represses, what is really going on under the surface. Such readings sought to activate ethical response and be a spur to activism, change, liberation, and transformation in arenas of difference and power.

How might Rabbi Held respond to this potential disparaging of his surface readings of the final form of the Torah texts he interprets? I think that Held (again in his irenic manner) might well affirm the drive to ethical activism to which such symptomatic readings aspire. He would affirm the need to remain ever vigilant to the potential power of texts to oppress, abuse, deceive, and marginalize. As a Jew, he is deeply aware of how texts, especially biblical and religious texts, can be used to defend and promote hatred and horrific violence. The long history of Christian anti-Semitism, the Crusades, and the Holocaust are ever present as reminders of how surface readings of religious texts may have horrendous results.

Held, however, also sees the positive interpretational possibilities of reading carefully and in detail the surface of biblical or Torah texts. If he were to find a place to stand in the current field of literary studies (I’m not sure he would be concerned to do so, but if he were) Held might point to some more recent options within literary studies that have turned to what is called “surface reading” or New Formalism as offering an alternative literary vision or approach more similar to his own project.³ The so-called New Criticism that began in the 1950s in literary theory came and went, but now an updated version has again emerged among some literary theorists.

This New Formalism or surface reading does not entirely reject or forget what has been learned in more ideological and contextual readings.⁴ However, this New Formalism redirects the reader to attend first of all to the intricate verbal structure of literary language as encountered at the surface of the text. These are close

2 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

3 See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.

4 On the capacity of New Formalism and renewed attention to literary aesthetics to generate ideological critique, see Claudie Breger, “The Return to Aesthetics in Literary Studies,” *German Studies Review* 35 (2021): 505–509. Interestingly, Michel Foucault, whose theorizing focused on the interplay of knowledge and power, described his approach to the study of archives of texts and artifacts on a particular topic (sexuality, punishment, madness, and the like) in a way that is relevant to this discussion. He emphasized the surface or literal meaning of texts, taking what texts say on their surface at face value. Rather than dig for “relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than . . . consciousness,” Foucault described himself as seeking “to define the relations on the very surface of discourse” and “to make visible what is invisible only because it’s too much on the surface of things.” *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–84*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 57–58.

readings that focus on what is called the “linguistic density” and “verbal complexity” that is woven into the surface of texts.

In this literary reading, the surface of the text is embraced, accepted, treated with respect, and then engaged with in debate, conversation, and dialogue alongside other texts. Texts are not just objects that must be made to fit an imposed theoretical and interpretive framework. Literary texts, presumably including ancient texts like the Bible, are dense and complex, even at their surface. Some blend of a hermeneutics of trust and hermeneutics of suspicion is often quite generative, as the interpreter listens closely and patiently to the often complex dynamics at the surface of carefully-crafted and rich literature. Affirming the contribution of the close reading of texts seems compatible with how Rabbi Held describes a Jewish way of reading:

Many years ago I heard R. Levi Lauer say that one of the greatest contributions the Jewish people have made to civilization is the gift of the close reading. And indeed, Jews have traditionally displayed their love of Torah, and in turn deepened it, by reading texts with exquisite care and attention to detail.⁵

The observation invites us to see that the close reading of texts is not an invention of modern literary theory, but more a recovery of an ancient Jewish practice, a treasure that is found and then lost and then found again and again. In a digital age of Twitter and social media, such patient, close readings of Torah texts may indeed be a precious treasure to be found again and cultivated. Close reading may slow readers down and allow us to seek the “linguistic density” and “verbal complexity” evident even in the surface of the text. Rabbi Held describes his own approach in a similar vein:

In writing these essays, I did not start out with an agenda, deciding what I wanted to say and then searching for a peg on which to hang a predetermined idea. Instead I tried to listen to the text, and to the history of its interpretation, and to see what emerged from the encounter. (Of course, what emerged was no doubt shaped at least in part by my own interests and predilections.)⁶

Held knows that as an interpreter of Torah he is not just a blank slate, a totally objective observer. The intention, however, as far as it is possible, is to listen patiently to the ancient text and its long tradition of interpretations, appreciating the complexities already baked into the surface texts of the Torah as well as the

5 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi.

6 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxi–xxii.

further complexities of the vast archive of texts of post-biblical interpretations. Part of this complexity of the surface of the rich and complex literary texts (like Torah) is that they contain their own critical (and self-critical) agency and thus stimulate dialogue.

If critique and self-critique (a hermeneutic of suspicion) is already deeply embedded into the surface texts of the Torah, so too is a hermeneutic of trust and hope. Torah repeatedly affirms the love of God for Israel and the love of God for all creation and the call to the people of God and all humans to participate in God's ongoing work of repairing a fractured and troubled world. I conclude with these wise words from Shai Held:

Judaism's view is that we are called to be world builders; God believes in our ability to renew ourselves, and to make real and deep contributions to realizing a more just, decent, and compassionate world. Participating in those grand visions, in fact, is a large part of what it means to be human. But we are all also asked to live with our eyes open, in full view of just how complicated both we and the world are, and thus of how hard and elusive moral progress really is. We can and must improve ourselves; but we cannot perfect ourselves. We can and must improve the world, but we cannot perfect it. That's part of what it means to wait for the Messiah rather than pretend that we *are* the Messiah. But waiting for the Messiah is not an excuse for fatalism or despair. On the contrary we wait by working, and building, and dedicating our lives to causes and realities greater than ourselves.⁷

To that, I say Amen!

7 Held, Bere'shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:6.