

The Perfect Craft Cocktail on a Sweltering Day: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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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.

I have a professional frustration, which perhaps some of you share: my professional and devotional study of Scripture leads me to believe that there is enormous wisdom within the diverse texts of the canon, wisdom for people of faith, of course, but also wisdom for people of little faith or even no faith—wisdom about how to understand our place in this world, our responsibilities to one another and to the planet, and to God. And yet it is hard to get that message out. The message that these Scriptures, rightly interpreted, can help us order ourselves in such a way that all people, and all of creation, will flourish. And beyond that, the Scriptures provide us with time-tested resources to make our way through this life, its joys and griefs, and everything along the way. And beyond *that*, Scripture provides of glimpses of transcendence—the sublime even—of a God who is both near to us and beyond our capacity to imagine.

On the one side, the Bible has been reduced to a totem for religious intolerance—a justification for exclusionary speech and policies that are often harmful not only to human beings but also to creation as a whole. Curiously many secularists share the view that the Bible offers an exclusionary, harmful message. The main difference between the secularists and the religious intolerants is that the secularists are explicit about the Bible's harmfulness, while the religious intolerants believe it expresses the divine will; in this latter view, it's just too bad for those who don't seem to benefit from the divine will. So broadly speaking, many secularists and religious intolerants agree on the *interpretation* of the Bible, they just disagree on whether the *effects* for our common life are salutary or not.

And what of those of us in the minority? This minority includes many of us at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting who have spent our professional lives dedicated to interpreting and teaching the Bible precisely because we think it offers wisdom for finding our human way on this planet, wisdom that seeks the flourishing of everyone and of the earth itself.

Many of us find our teaching and research to be fulfilling. We cherish it when students respond with deep appreciation of our teaching, and when our books and other writings seem to have an impact in the guild and in faith communities. Yet it is difficult to see that any of this moves the needle very far. Most of us are keenly aware that it is not those with a depth of biblical knowledge who command the microphone on Bible-related matters in the wider culture and in the media. To be sure, some efforts are worthy and have a salutary effect: the Bible Odyssey project of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, has been a positive initiative to speak into the culture and especially the educational realm, but it is only a start.

So it's hard to get the message out that the Bible is actually life-giving, which is why this two-volume work by Shai Held feels like the perfect craft cocktail on a sweltering day: it combines high quality ingredients with flavor, attention to presentation, and creativity. The result excels in slaking thirst and thus bearing hope to the weary. Held's perceptive eye for the deepest commitments of Scripture, and his winsome way of presenting them—in small sips that anyone can take—result in a much-needed and compelling reflection on what lies at the heart of the Torah. I want to offer appreciation by commenting on Held's approach, note a few examples, and then close with a few questions for further reflection.

Held's Approach to Torah

Right away in the first sentences of the Introduction we see that we are on different interpretive ground from the norm: Held speaks of the “*enchantments* of learning and teaching Torah.”¹ By invoking “enchantment”—a cousin of joy—Held sets himself up as countercultural, not only to the ethos of popular interpretations, but to the scholarly guild as well. Most of us professional biblical academics don't speak of our work as something that “enchants” us, but maybe we should. Rabbi Held seamlessly weaves first-rate biblical scholarship with rabbinic interpretations and other readings and reflections, both ancient and modern. This is a delight. One feels that one is being steeped in deep wisdom of the ages; it is a gift to readers to bring together into one place so many life-giving interpretations of Scripture from across the ages, along with the author's own. And to do it with winsome prose that is easy on the eyes and brain, in the form of Torah portions, which makes for

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

digestible delicacies hospitably offered to all with a taste for what Scripture has to offer.

Pharaoh's Ingratitude

The first example I want to mention is from Exodus: Held unpacks the ways in which the early chapters of Exodus explore the problem of ingratitude: Pharaoh believes he needs no one, relies on no one, and this is his core problem.²

To be ungrateful is to be unable—or again perhaps just unwilling—to acknowledge other people, past or present, who have made our lives possible. . . . If we are ungrateful, if we don't acknowledge the reality of just how much has been given to us rather than made or achieved by us, we will actually be incapable of worshipping anything but ourselves.³

In Held's reading, Pharaoh's ingratitude is an example of the quintessentially human problem of ingratitude, and the implications such a posture has for us and for the world. The mind lights on many resonances in our current cultural moment, but for the moment I'll name one: This reflection is timely indeed as public debate unfolds around the question of reparations for slavery. Many Americans respond that they themselves have not benefited from the institution of slavery, and African Americans today do not suffer as a result of that past. This response is grounded in a perhaps peculiarly American belief that every individual's success or failure is dependent exclusively on that person's own efforts. Held's reading of Exodus suggests that this kind of thinking is precisely what afflicts Pharaoh. Held points to Ezekiel's portrait of another Pharaoh who postures in a similar way, saying, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself" (Ezek 29:3). The result of this false self-reliance is arrogance and narcissism, which have catastrophic consequences for those under the heel of such power. In a subsequent section Held unpacks how Pharaoh "is a living embodiment of everything that works to undermine the world" (146), and he is undone by the very forces which he embodies, which tragically takes many innocents with him. We are not as far from Pharaoh as we might wish.

Isaac and Hagar

About Genesis 22, Held asks what interpreters have asked for millennia: what happened to Isaac at the end of the *Akedah*? Though the story carefully tells us that Isaac and Abraham go up to Moriah together (Gen 22:6), it mysteriously makes no mention of Isaac at the end: "Abraham then returned to his servants" (Gen 22:19).

2 Held, Shemot #2 (Exod 1:1–6:1), "Gratitude and Liberation," in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:128–33.

3 Held, Shemot #2, 1:129–30.

Taking a page from a midrash, Held suggests that the traumatized Isaac has taken off in order to find Hagar in the wilderness, both to seek solace with another who has suffered, but also to offer his own comfort to her. But even more so, Isaac goes to find a God who does not terrify with inscrutable commands but is the one who meets with compassion the vulnerable and the outcasts. This is the God whom Hagar met at the end of Genesis 21 and is the one whom Isaac seeks.⁴

I have studied the *Akedah* a fair bit—we spend a lot of time thinking with our seminary students about it (and using Ellen Davis’s wonderful reading in *Getting Involved with God*).⁵ As part of that, I’ve thought a lot about the connections between the near-sacrifice of Hagar in Gen. 21 and the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22—the evident parallels, linguistic and thematic, between these two stories. But I have never thought about a possible connection between the nearly-sacrificed Isaac and the nearly-sacrificed Hagar in quite this enriching and thought-provoking way.

Siding with Moses?

To be sure, there are some places where I did not find myself in tune with Held’s approach to a story. In Numbers 12, for example, Held’s sympathies lie entirely with Moses, whose authority has been questioned by Aaron and Miriam.⁶ If Held notes the unequal treatment of Miriam in the dispensing of punishment, I missed it. In a world that still routinely punishes and demonizes women for either exercising or deigning to reach for too much power, this singular focus on the beleaguered Moses feels out of tune, and like a lost opportunity.

But these off-key moments are few and far between. Ample interpretive delights await a reader hungry for insight and understanding of the Scriptures. The format of the daily Torah portion is reader-friendly—with a few pages of commentary each, one gets enough substance to be intellectually and spiritually engaged, but the chunks are short enough to pick up and absorb when time is short.

Concluding Thoughts

A few minor points: not surprisingly, the emphasis throughout the volumes is on the ethical. This is for the most part to be commended, though I sometimes find myself wanting a bit more of the *magnum mysterium*, the ambiguity, even the terrifying sublime of the divine, to find its interpretive place. But it may be

4 Held, Hayyei Sarah #1 (Gen 23:1–25:18), “Isaac’s Search: On the *Akedah* and Its Sftermath,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:40–42.

5 Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2001), chap. 6: “‘Take Your Son’: The Binding of Isaac” (50–64).

6 Held, Be-ha’alotekha #2 (Num 8:1–12:18), “After Pain, Prayer: What Moses (and Job) Can Teach Us,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:119–23.

enough to lay alongside Held's work some of Ellen Davis's or Dennis Olson's as complementary perspectives.

A second minor point: it seems to me that the book could be cross-marketed to thoughtful Christians. To do this, one would need to include the chapter and verse references for each section of biblical text in the heading for each Torah portion, so that one is not constantly flipping to the Scripture index as I did.⁷ A book like this deserves to have an even wider audience and I could imagine some interfaith good could result from a crossover in audiences. I think of the folks in my own congregation who are hungry for spiritually-rich biblical interpretation and who long to have their theological understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures expanded.

I am grateful to Shai Held for his sensitivity to the melodies and harmonies of Scripture, and am equally thankful that he has harnessed his energies in such a way that his insights into that scriptural music could be shared with a broader public.

7 Editor's comment: For the benefit of the reader, chapter and verse references have been added for each Torah portion cited in the essays in this thematic journal issue.