A reasonable reading

Anglo-Israeli philosopher Yoram Hazony's new book asserts that the Bible should be read as a work of reason, not solely one of revelation

• SAM SOKOL

With over-large glasses, jacket and neatly combed hair, Yoram Hazony is every inch the stereotypical academic. However, when he begins to hold forth on his interpretation of the Bible, sitting behind a large wooden desk in his office in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood, Hazony shows himself to be anything but a run-of-the-mill academic.

His latest thesis is startling: an assertion that since the 19th century, biblical scholars have sidelined the Jewish Bible in the study of the great works of Western thought due to its perceived nature as a work of revelation rather than reason.

The dichotomy between reason and revelation, he says, is not one that the prophets and sages who wrote the Bible would have recognized and is, in fact, a Christian innovation. This revisionist view of the Jewish canon, he asserts, has damaged the cause of religion in the 21st century's great debates on the role and utility of religion.

"For most of the last 2,000 years, the Jews and their books and their ideas were an extremely significant player in the history of the world," he says. "I think you can easily make the case that the Hebrew Bible has been the most influential book in the history of the world, and if not, then it is certainly a contender, and the Jews, as the bearers of the Tanach [Hebrew Bible], with all the other texts that were generated around it by the rabbis, were considered to be a significant and important player."

The scholar – who founded the Jerusalem-based Shalem Center, a think-tank well known among English-speaking Jews for its journal *Azure* – has codified his ideas in his latest book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*.

In his book, he contends that dogmas are foreign to the religious thought of the biblical Jews and that the God of Abraham values disobedience and independent thought. Hazony also theorizes that the narrative structure of the Bible, both in terms of individual books and its final, composite and edited form, was arranged in order to make arguments of a "general nature" regarding the great existential issues of philosophy.

While Hazony, himself an Orthodox Jew, does not reject a reading of the Bible as divine revelation, he says the final narrative structure is too ordered and presents too many recurring leitmotifs not to have been meant to convey a philosophical subtext.

"At some point, around 2,000 years ago, and you can argue about exactly when, the Christian church adopted a sharp distinction between reason and revelation, which pitted the two against one another by definition, where reason is those things that human beings can do unassisted, of their own natural abilities," he says.

There are two ways to get answers according to this theory, he continues. "One is by reason, where we figure it out using just our own natural abilities, and the other is [that] we bypass our natural abilities and we rely on a miracle in order to have God answer the questions for us.... This distinction has become kind of the framework for thinking about the Bible."

However, he says, while the biblical authors did include their own religious thoughts, which can be gleaned from a careful textual analysis and from using the tools of literary theory, they did not believe that their own thoughts were distinct from the prophecies they had. If you thought hard about something and an answer came to you, it could be divine inspiration, he believes.

The idea that the Bible deals with philosophical issues may not be a revelation for many Orthodox Jews, but for many in the secular, academic world, he says, it is incredible.

Recounting a book-reading he held in the United States, in which he brought up another of his controversial theses, the imperfection of the divinity, Hazony says that his audience, many of whom were confirmed atheists, was suddenly interested in the Bible upon hearing a new view unfamiliar to them.

The Bible holds a great deal of relevance for contemporary society, he goes on, but Jews have not entered into the debate against the new atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, leaving the fight to Christians who wholeheartedly believe in the Bible as a non-rational document.

Making a plea for more Jews to join rabbis such as British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in the global dialogue on the relevance of religion and the enduring importance of the Bible as a work of human reason, Hazony says that for much of human history, the Jews were considered an intellectual force to be reckoned with, even as they were subject to hatred and discrimination.

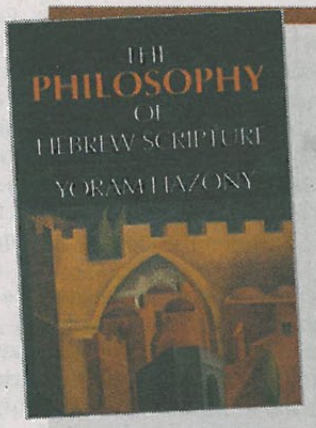
"Now it's true that the last time the Jews were effectively competing for people to actually convert to Judaism, as opposed to being Christian or pagan, was a very long time ago, although that did take place during the Roman Empire. People don't remember that," he says.

"Nevertheless, even after the Jews stopped competing for converts, I think that in both the Christian and Islamic worlds, it was obvious to many, if not to all of the significant intellectual players, that the Jews had something to say and that they were a serious force to be reckoned with," he argues. "You couldn't just think about the way the world ought to be and the way human beings ought to live and the nature of reality without taking into consideration what the Jews had to say."

At least, he continues, "that was the case up until between 300 and 150 years ago. Maybe people didn't like the Jews, but there was an understanding that the Jews were bearers of some kind of important tradition. So somebody like the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau would say, 'I just have to know what the Jews of Amsterdam have to say about things, because I just can't see that I've considered all the possibilities until I know what the Jews have to say.'"

This relevance has been lost, he concludes, but he believes that by reinvigorating the Bible as a book of reason in the public discourse, the Jews can regain their role in the world's great intellectual battles.

YORAM HAZONY. 'For most of the last 2,000 years, the Jews and their books and their ideas were an extremely significant player in the history of the world.' (Courtesy)



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