Kabbalah as a Shield against the “Scourge” of Biblical Criticism: A Comparative Analysis of the Torah Commentaries of Elia Benamozegh and Mordecai Breuer

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The belief that the Torah was given by divine revelation, as defined by Maimonides in his eighth principle of faith and accepted collectively by the Jewish people,¹ conflicts with the opinions of modern biblical scholarship.² As a result, biblical commentators adhering to both the *peshat* (literal or contextual) method and the belief in the divine revelation of the Torah, are unable to utilize the exegetical insights associated with the documentary hypothesis developed by Wellhausen and his school, a respected and accepted academic discipline.³ As Moshe Greenberg has written, “orthodoxy saw biblical criticism in general as irreconcilable with the principles of Jewish faith.”⁴ Therefore, in the words of D. S. Sperling, “in general, Orthodox Jews in America, Israel, and elsewhere have remained on the periphery of biblical scholarship.”⁵ However, the documentary hypothesis is not the only obstacle to the religious *peshat* commentator. Theological complications also arise from the use of archeological discoveries from the ancient Near East, which are analogous to the Torah and can be a very rich source for its interpretation.⁶ The comparison of biblical

verses with ancient extra-biblical texts can raise doubts regarding the divine origin of the Torah and weaken faith in its unique sanctity.

The Orthodox *peshat* commentator who aspires to explain the plain contextual meaning of the Torah and produce a commentary open to the various branches of biblical scholarship must clarify and demonstrate how this use of modern scholarship is compatible with his or her belief in the divine origin of the Torah. To a certain extent, the commentator is required to “convert” the findings of scientific research to enable them to enter the “congregation” of traditional exegesis.

In this article, I will attempt to trace the path of two commentators who rose to this challenge: Rabbi Elia Benamozegh and Rabbi Mordechai Breuer. Both men were traditional Torah scholars who wrote commentaries on the Torah that opened doors to the world of modern biblical scholarship. Rabbi Benamozegh attempted to explain the text of the Torah in the context of various parallels from the cultures of the peoples of the ancient Near East, especially Egypt. Rabbi Breuer based his commentary on the documentary hypothesis of Wellhausen and his school. Both these scholars, each in his own way, assimilated the insights of modern scholarship into a traditional, almost mystical, commentary. Their commentaries received criticism from both academic and religious circles, and generated extensive debate.

The recourse to Kabbalah in confronting modern biblical scholarship is not self-explanatory, and could even be called surprising; the mystical-homiletical reading of the Torah and its critical-literal reading do not occupy the same plane of reference. We must, therefore, ascertain how Benamozegh and Breuer used Kabbalah in the framework of what purport to be *peshat* commentaries. What was the hermeneutic-theological mechanism that enabled them, on the one hand, to maintain connections with modern biblical scholarship and, on the other, to continue to adhere to the belief in the divine revelation of the Torah in its traditional sense? In my opinion, this analysis transcends the mere clarification of an historical point and will enrich the current, revived discussion of the question of the feasibility of “religious biblical scholarship.” We will first discuss each commentator separately, and conclude by comparing and contrasting the two.

Rabbi Elia Benamozegh: His Life and Sources of Influence

Rabbi Elia Benamozegh was born in Livorno (Leghorn), Italy in 1823 to a Jewish family that had emigrated from Fez, Morocco.⁷ He lived and worked in the city his entire life, until his death in 1900. In his search for harmony

between academic study and the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Benamozegh saw himself as continuing the path of Maimonides, and even took upon himself the task of “removing the rust of centuries” during which there had been a separation between unfettered research and Torah study. Abraham Berliner described him as a genius “born under the wrong star,” and he has also been called “the Plato of Italian Jewry.”⁸

Rabbi Benamozegh left behind a diverse and varied literary *oeuvre*, including polemical writings that attempted to prove both the antiquity of the Kabbalah and the superiority and antiquity of Jewish over Christian ethics,⁹ as well as a book analyzing the relationship between Israel and the nations of the world, a subject that lay at the heart of his intellectual activity.¹⁰ He also wrote a general introduction to the books of the Oral Law,¹¹ and a halachic treatise about the custom of cremating the dead.¹² I would like to focus here on his commentary to the Torah, *Em la-Mikra*.

The Commentary Em la-Mikra and Its Connection to Kabbalah

The commentary *Em la-Mikra* on the Five Books of Moses was published in Leghorn at a press owned by Rabbi Benamozegh between the years 1862 and 1863. On the title page of the book the author explains its contents: “It includes comments, studies, and new elucidations on the basis of philology, critique, archeology, the history of Babylonia, Syria, Egypt, etc., and the beliefs and customs of ancient peoples; a definitive assessment of some opinions and theories of contemporary scholars and critics; as well as a thorough examination of some midrashim of the sages and their Talmudic and metaphysical traditions according to the spirit of the text.”

How did Rabbi Benamozegh justify the integration of “the history of Babylon, Syria, and Egypt” and “the beliefs and customs of ancient peoples” within the framework of his unqualified belief in the divine origin of the Torah? In order to answer this question, I will demonstrate that despite this opening precis, one must not make the mistake of categorizing this book as a mere linguistic, contextual commentary. First of all, the commentary includes innumerable references to the Zohar and mystical lore not appropriate for a “normal,” scholarly *peshat* commentary,¹³ though these references are not always explicitly stated.¹⁴ However, this does not exhaust the connection between the commentary and the Kabbalah. Rabbi Benamozegh understood the Kabbalah as the essential, ancient, esoteric kernel of the Jewish religion, without which it is impossible to understand the Written Torah.¹⁵

Aimé Pallière, Rabbi Benamozegh's devoted disciple, testified to the centrality of the Kabbalah in his thought:¹⁶

It is essential, therefore, to point out at once that the Kabbalah—which Benamozegh always considered to be “the most legitimate theology in Judaism”—is in no sense a mere mass of superstitions. . . . In his opinion, Kabbalism was not even a separate, discrete branch of knowledge. Instead he readily said of it what Renan¹⁷ said of philosophy in general: “That it is the distillation of all departments of knowledge—the sound, the light, the vibration of that divine essence within each of them.” . . . Not only do Jewish doctrines thus gain an amplitude and force which anti-kabbalistic exegesis is powerless to give them, but certain religious practices as well.¹⁸

According to Rabbi Benamozegh, Kabbalah is ancient Jewish wisdom that was passed down from generation to generation along with the Oral Law, though there is no known written record of it until its much later appearance in the Zohar. For him the Written Law is merely an external shell into which Kabbalah breathes life and spirit:

In all that is related to religion, in other words, internal beliefs and opinions, the Written Torah has nothing to say because it is merely a book about the external aspects of the national religion and generalities. Only the Oral Law, or Kabbalah, is internal, and the treasury of beliefs and the religion of the individual Jew, in that he is a man and spiritual being. Therefore, with regard to the degrees of spirituality and the station of a man in the levels of wisdom and holiness, [the Written Law] will not address it at great length, and sometimes will be completely silent on the subject.¹⁹

These viewpoints are what allowed Benamozegh to include “archeology and the history of Babylonia, Syria, and Egypt, etc., and the beliefs and customs of ancient peoples” within the context of his commentary to the Torah without any theological difficulty. The Oral Law and the Kabbalah are the primary sources of human culture in all of its varied forms of expression, and the Written Law is the partial revelation of this ancient tradition. This implies that the many parallels to the Written Torah known to us from discoveries in the Near East do not challenge the Written Torah's validity and sanctity. On the contrary, they confirm its ancillary status. According to Rabbi Benamozegh, the use of the various mythologies and literatures of ancient religions is justified because they

include much of the ancient *hebraica veritas* within their legends and pagan rituals. Comparative philological analysis of that time revealed insights similar to the wisdom of the ancient Kabbalah: “The cutting edge of the latest secular research is connected to and linked with the outer limit of the very earliest metaphysical wisdom.”²⁰

I would now like to demonstrate Rabbi Benamozegh’s methodology by way of an example taken from his commentary to Numbers 3:45.²¹ I will begin with some brief background information that is necessary for understanding the commentary. The Torah teaches that Moses was commanded to take the Levites in place of the firstborn children of the other tribes, as well as “the cattle of the Levites in place of their cattle” (Num. 3:45). Rabbi Benamozegh deliberates over the meaning of this exchange of cattle.²² Rashi explains that “the cattle of the Levites did not redeem the firstborn, clean animals of the other tribes, but rather the firstborn donkeys.” Rabbi Benamozegh notes that it can be inferred from this commentary that the Torah spoke of “cattle” in the generic sense, even though the specific intention was donkeys. Likewise, in the laws of redemption given in Exodus 13:13, the Torah uses the word “ass,” while in Numbers 18:15 it refers only to an “unclean animal.” Rabbi Benamozegh tries to explain why the phrase “unclean animal” is used in the Torah to refer specifically to donkeys (For the sake of clarity I have divided the following passage into sections):

[A] I would now like to add that it is very possible that Moses and the People of Israel referred to the donkey as, simply, the “unclean animal.” Here the Kabbalah agrees with recent research on ancient Egypt, for we know that in their culture the donkey is the animal sacred to Typhon,²³ the god of evil, and is the generic “unclean animal.”²⁴ It is the antithesis of the bull, sacred to Osiris, the good god who fights against Typhon.²⁵ The kabbalists say the exact same thing: the bull alludes to the principle from which Osiris sprung, just as man is hewn from the monkey,²⁶ and the donkey is from the impure side, as is known. The Torah expressed itself with language that is agreeable to both Kabbalah and the culture of ancient Egypt.

[B] And this is to signify that the soul of the Torah is the wisdom of the Kabbalah, which is compatible with the beliefs current in that time and place. This alone will silence the critique that claims that the laws of the Torah were copied by us from the laws and customs of Egypt. In truth, they are similar in many ways, and not, as some thought, easily differentiated.

However, Moses did not learn from them, as the heretics believe. It is simply that the divine wisdom within him, known to the ancestors of the Patriarchs, agrees in some respects with what remained known and accepted among the important priests of Egypt, as well as the priests of India, Persia, and Greece, who had the same laws and beliefs as the Egyptians.

[C] The kabbalists demonstrated their brilliance when they said that, of all the nations, Egypt is closest to holiness. They called it the “second chariot,” second in rank after the Land of Israel, the kingdom that is the first chariot. If they had been familiar with the culture of ancient Egypt as we know it now, we would have suspected that they said this because of their knowledge of the similarity between Egypt and Israel. The truth is that they knew nothing about it. Nonetheless, they came to a conclusion that proved correct with startling accuracy. Moreover, they prepared in advance a means of silencing those who deny the divinity of our Torah. Is the fact that this wisdom was hewn from the gut of Israel and the bedrock of the forefathers not an open rebuke to them?

[D] Perhaps this is the reason why the bull and the donkey are always mentioned together in the laws of work on the Sabbath, in the prohibition on plowing with an ox and an ass together, and in other places.

The catalyst for this commentary, as we have seen, was a stylistic-linguistic clarification of the biblical text: Why does the phrase “unclean animal” refer specifically to the donkey, and not to the many other unclean animals? In order to answer this question, Rabbi Benamozegh turns both to Egyptian mythology and to Kabbalah, and points out (in the first section, with characteristic brevity) that in both these corpora the donkey is described as the embodiment of evil and anarchy, and the bull as the force of creation and holiness. The terminology adopted by the Torah corresponds with this concept.

The parallels between the Torah and Egyptian mythology are liable to raise the argument that this is a case of unilateral influence: ancient Egyptian literature influenced the wording of the Torah. It is self-evident that this kind of argument undermines the belief in the divine origin of the Torah. However, according to Rabbi Benamozegh (in section B), the fact that we also find the concept of the inferiority of the donkey and the superiority of the bull in kabbalistic literature uproots this heretical, exegetical possibility. In his opinion, one cannot separate the Kabbalah from the Written Torah because the Kabbalah is the “soul” of the Written Torah. Therefore, “this alone” (i.e., only the Kabbalah) will be able to “silence the critique [biblical

criticism] that claims that the laws of the Torah were copied by us from the laws and customs of Egypt.” How is this so? The fact that the characteristics of the donkey also appear in kabbalistic literature demonstrates that Moses did not take this idea from the Egyptians. More specifically, the Kabbalah, despite its belated realization in literary form, is the ancient wisdom of the People of Israel passed down to Moses from generation to generation. Thus, an ancient tradition about the uncleanness and singular inferiority of the donkey, which was transmitted orally and reached Moses, is what determined the use of the phrase “unclean animal” in connection with the donkey in the Written Torah. A shred, a crumb, or an echo (“what remained known”) of this ancient universal tradition remained in the hands of “the important priests of Egypt”; not only with them, but also among “the priests of India, Persia, and Greece.” The seeds of the Kabbalah, the ancient divine wisdom, did not remain with Israel alone; they were dispersed and disseminated far and wide.

The Controversy Surrounding Em la-Mikra: “The Great Derision with which He Ridiculed the Wisdom of the Kabbalah”

Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal, 1800–1865), the well-known contemporary of Rabbi Benamozegh, did not accept the *Zohar* as a legitimate source for the interpretation of the Torah. In general, it is obvious why Rabbi Benamozegh’s work did not resonate well in an enlightened intellectual atmosphere that regarded the Kabbalah as a “black stain on the fabric of pure Judaism.”²⁷

However, *Em la-Mikra* also received harsh criticism from conservative forces within the Jewish world. The rabbis of Aleppo placed a ban on the book and ordered it to be burnt. Led by chief rabbi, Ḥayim Mordecai Leveton, Aleppo’s rabbinical leaders, in an 1865 letter to the rabbis of Jerusalem, denounced Rabbi Benamozegh as a heretic and banned his commentary on the grounds that it was based on innovative modern research involving the comparative analysis of Judaism and ancient pagan religions.

Rabbi Benamozegh responded to the ban on his works in the framework of a series of articles in the journal *Ha-Levanon*, under the title “*Zori Gilad—Iggeret Hitnatzlut le-Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*.” Among other matters, he responded at great length to the claim that he “ascribes knowledge of the Kabbalah to non-Jews, heretics, and philosophers. Furthermore, he also attempted to prove the affinity of kabbalistic terminology to terms found in Near Eastern mythologies.

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer: His Life and Sources of Influence

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer was born on 14 May, 1921 in Frankfurt, Germany and died in Jerusalem on 24 February, 2007.²⁸ Breuer published a new edition of the Hebrew Bible, based on extensive study of the most reliable biblical manuscripts, in particular the Aleppo Codex, that is generally considered the best and most authoritative extant edition. Rabbi Breuer also published books on the cantillation notes and translated from German part of the commentary on the Torah written by his great-grandfather, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. His first work on biblical exegesis, *Pirkei Moadot* (Essays on the Festivals) was published in 1986, followed by *Pirkei Bereshit* (Essays on Genesis) in 1998. In 1999, Rabbi Breuer was awarded the Israel Prize for his work in the field of rabbinic literature.²⁹ Two books, *Pirkei Mikraot* (Essays on Biblical Texts) and *Pirkei Yishayahu* (Essays on Isaiah) were published posthumously. These works reflect his exegetical methodology, known as *shitat ha-behinot*, the “aspects theory” or “aspects approach.”

The Kabbalah in the Framework of the Aspects Theory

Rabbi Breuer explained that the scientific conclusions of biblical criticism “not only do not harm Jewish faith, they are important and necessary to every genuine student of the Bible.” However, as a devout believer in the divine origin of the Torah, he acknowledged that “biblical criticism was revealed in a foul and ugly form, conceived and born in impurity, raised and nurtured in iniquity.” If so, how can a believing Jew make use of its conclusions, which he himself described as “important and necessary to every genuine student”? In answering this question, Rabbi Breuer invoked the mystical tradition: “The mystical tradition is the spiritual meaning of the conclusions of scientific research, it is the inner content of all the layers that are revealed to the scholar by means of linguistic and stylistic analysis.”³⁰

Rabbi Breuer’s attempts to reconcile contradictory passages in the Torah were based on the premise that there are various reflections of divinity.³¹ He took the concept of various divine aspects, facets, or demeanors from kabbalistic theosophy, which delineates a complex and multi-faceted structure of divine emanations (*sefirot*).³² Rabbi Breuer integrated the mystical tradition into his exegetical methodology because it provided him with the terminology he needed.³³

Rabbi Breuer illustrated his methodology with the classic example of the two creation stories that open the book of Genesis.³⁴ Biblical scholarship explains the radical differences between these stories by ascribing them to different sources. Rabbi Breuer however explained that they reflect different aspects of God.

The exegetical strategy of the aspects theory, including its kabbalistic element, is not effective in resolving all of the contradictions that emerge from the biblical text. For example, in his introduction to *Pirkei Moadot*, Rabbi Breuer used the contradictions between the passages in the Torah concerning Hebrew slaves to demonstrate his methodology. However, in this example, Rabbi Breuer did not distinguish between the various passages on the basis of different divine qualities or manners but on the basis of the passages’ different aims.

In conclusion, the mystical tradition served Rabbi Breuer only as a theological-conceptual vessel for the various sources identified by the school of biblical criticism. The kabbalistic element is not an inherent part of the aspects theory; when Rabbi Breuer was able to “get by” without it, he turned to an alternate, exoteric, conceptual source.

Rabbi Breuer was doubtless aware of the apparent lack of coherence in his approach, and at the beginning of *Pirkei Bereshit* he explained that the “Elohist” and “Yahwist” names of God used consistently in the many double stories in Genesis serve as strong anchor for his method. However, it is important to determine whether the categorization of these passages according to various divine attributes also helps to explain their content. Does the classification of a particular passage as reflecting the aspect of the Tetragrammaton help us to understand its meaning? The answer to this question is very complex.

In the framework of clarifying the relationship between the creation passages, Rabbi Breuer made an explicit connection between the classification of the stories according to various divine attributes (justice/mercy, nature/revelation) and the contextual meaning of the verses.³⁵

For example, he explained Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22) in a similar vein: “We find that Jacob saw two visions here, each with a different content, deriving from two different divine attributes. The difference between the content of the two visions is the *direct result* of the fundamental difference between these two attributes.”³⁶ In other cases, however, the difference in content is not the direct result of a fundamental difference between two attributes. For example, in discussing the contradictions within the narrative of the sale of Joseph into slavery, Rabbi Breuer concluded: “It can be seen that the brothers’ words in each of the two attributes are not the same : in the attribute of

‘YHVH,’ the brothers sought only to ‘kill him,’ while in the attribute of ‘*Elohim*’ they also turned their attention to his corpse: ‘throw him into one of the pits.’”³⁷ Here it is difficult to explain how the difference between the brothers’ words is connected to the different divine attributes. Why does the divine attribute of “YHVH” not relate to Joseph’s corpse while, the attribute of “*Elohim*” does?

The kabbalistic element, which Rabbi Breuer used to a limited degree in the framework of the aspects theory, was developed further by Yosef Avivi in his 1977 book *Al Signonot ha-Kodesh ba-Torah* (On the Forms of Holiness in the Torah).³⁸ This work was described as “an attempt to unite the Kabbalah and biblical criticism,” and its author saw it as an expansion of Rabbi Breuer’s idea of uniting faith and science in biblical exegesis. In my opinion, this book can be characterized as an essentially kabbalistic work, as its aim is not to explain the biblical text, but rather to clarify the Bible’s kabbalistic foundations. In effect, the essay refines the exegetical application of the Kabbalah, which was only put to limited use within the aspects theory as formulated by Rabbi Breuer.

We can close this section by concluding, on the basis of Rabbi Breuer’s own statements about the principles of his method, that the Kabbalah is an integral part of his approach. However, in practice, an examination of his commentaries reveals that he did not always make use of the Kabbalah, and sometimes even used it in a way that could be described as “mechanical”: passages are categorized according to different aspects, yet the aspects do not help close the gaps or resolve the tensions between the texts.

The Controversy Surrounding the Aspects Approach: “We Will Not Hide in the Mist of Esoteric Wisdom and Mysticism”

Despite the limited use of the Kabbalah in the aspects approach, its very inclusion within an exegetical method purporting to be academic and critical has elicited harsh criticism. Jacob Katz argued that Rabbi Breuer applied different standards to the Bible than he did to the Kabbalah.³⁹ While Rabbi Breuer used research, investigation, and critical analysis in the context of his commentary on the Bible, he treated the Kabbalah as an endemic Jewish tradition that must not be critically analyzed or challenged.

Professor Yosef Heinemann has likewise argued that, despite the distress inherent in the confrontation between traditional belief and biblical criticism: “If the price we have to pay to be free from this distress is the acceptance of mystical traditions, we will have to totally relinquish the rationalist approach to every question of faith and religion, and it seems to me that for all those

who are troubled by the arguments of biblical criticism . . . his solution does not solve anything. On the contrary, it takes us out of the frying pan and into the fire.”⁴⁰

The renowned biblical scholar Meir Weiss has declared that Rabbi Breuer’s approach is marred by dogmatism in that it calls for a rejection of all exegesis that is not kabbalistic, “even the exegesis of the sages.”⁴¹ Another argument against Rabbi Breuer, made by Rabbi Yaakov Zaidman, concerns the public revelation of the secret wisdom of the Torah. “We will not hide in the mist of esoteric wisdom and mysticism, and he who makes his theories public like Rabbi Breuer cannot hide behind claims of secrecy and hidden wisdom.”⁴²

Rabbi Breuer responded to his critics. A distinctly polemic tone can be detected in his second article, published in *De’ot*:

There is more than one approach to the sanctification of the secular that is required with regard to biblical criticism. . . . Therefore, whoever thinks that he can accomplish this task by means of exoteric wisdom alone—may his strength increase and his faith grow, and may he succeed in the path he has chosen. . . .

In truth, after all the spiritual upheavals of the last centuries, today it is impossible to reduce the faith of Israel to the single dimension of the exoteric tradition. Go and see if in any of the communities of the diaspora there is one group among our people that has not been influenced in one way or another by the esoteric wisdom of Kabbalah.⁴³

Rabbi Breuer even pointed out which type of kabbalistic readings he thought would prove successful; not all branches of kabbalistic hermeneutics are appropriate for the task of “sanctifying the secular”:

When we talk about the exegesis of the Torah according to esoteric wisdom, our intention is not those esoteric techniques, such as letter combinations or assigning letters numerical value (*gematria*), that have nothing to do with the contextual meaning of the text. For it is the contextual meaning of the text that we are trying to ascertain, and from this goal we will neither waver nor desist.⁴⁴

An additional, if less significant, criticism was leveled against Rabbi Breuer from the traditional side of the religious world. Predictably, these critics warned of the danger to religious belief inherent in exposure to the ideas of biblical

criticism. Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, one of the heads of the Har Etzion Yeshiva explained: “Even if a man is himself wholehearted and God-fearing, regarding the Torah as the holy and pure word of God, whose only intention is to take from biblical criticism what is useful and reject the rest, the question of the spiritual price that he is liable to have to pay for this exposure hangs over his head nonetheless.”⁴⁵ Rabbi Shlomo Aviner also opposed confronting biblical criticism because “our master, Rabbi Kook considered it to be completely false.”⁴⁶

Rabbi Benamozegh and Rabbi Breuer: A Comparison

R. J. Zwi Werblowsky has divided the different theological approaches used in the confrontation between the belief in the divine origin of the Torah and biblical criticism into four categories:⁴⁷

1. The **fundamentalist approach** utterly rejects biblical criticism and its findings, and regards the belief in the divine origin of the Torah as a fact, completely ignoring biblical criticism. This, as we have seen, is the approach of most Orthodox Jewish commentators.
2. The **“Catholic” approach** argues that religion, the world, and reason were all given by the same benign Providence, and that, therefore, a contradiction between the findings of biblical criticism and the faith in the divine origin of the Torah is impossible. If biblical criticism leads to conclusions that undermine the belief in the divine origin of the Torah, its scientific validity must be questioned, and even denied. This is the approach of Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto.
3. The **“Protestant” approach** does not deny the existence of contradictions between biblical criticism and faith, but rejects the attempt to reconcile them. Each is correct within its own sphere and we must live in a state of dialectic tension. This is the approach of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who argued that, while biblical scholarship is valid and accurate, it is irrelevant to religious faith. Faith mandates the acceptance of the authority of *halakhah*, which in turn determines the nature of the correct approach to the biblical text.

Werblowsky placed Rabbi Breuer’s aspects theory under the category of the **dialectic-mystical approach**. His method receives its own category because the other categories are too narrow to encompass it. Like the

"fundamentalist," Rabbi Breuer accepts the traditional belief in the divine origin of the Torah as fact. However, unlike the "fundamentalist," he does not reject modern scholarship as a complete falsehood. Like the "Protestant," he separates religious faith from the physical world. However, he adds a "Catholic" layer: there is a connection between biblical criticism and faith. The findings of critical scholarship lead to the esoteric and to the realization that "the mystical tradition is the spiritual meaning of the conclusions of scientific research."⁴⁸

In this article, I have attempted to show that it would be appropriate to include Rabbi Benamozegh among those adhering to the dialectic-mystical approach. Rabbi Breuer and Rabbi Benamozegh made use of different branches of modern biblical scholarship in their commentaries: Rabbi Breuer accepted the documentary hypothesis of biblical scholarship (although rejecting its historical conclusions), whereas Rabbi Benamozegh used Near Eastern mythology as a source for comparative exegesis (and never once referred to the documentary hypothesis). While they made use of different elements of this research, they both shared the realization that they could find their place in the framework of an exegesis faithful to the principle of the divine origin of the Torah only by means of that same "mystical dialectic."

The exact nature of this mystical dialectic differs in the work of each of the two scholars. Rabbi Benamozegh's exegesis is part of his basic, comprehensive perception that the Written Torah is by nature partial and fragmented, in two ways: in its representation of ancient traditions, including esoteric lore, passed down orally from generation to generation, and in its linguistic limitations that necessitate exegesis, elaboration, and explication drawn from the wellsprings of the esoteric tradition. The surprising integration of mysticism and Near Eastern mythology in his commentary can be understood only within the context of this basic viewpoint. Rabbi Benamozegh was raised and educated in the world of the Kabbalah, considered himself a kabbalist, and conducted an extensive campaign for the recognition of the authenticity of the Kabbalah and its inclusion in the canon of Jewish literature. Thus, in his opinion, the Written Torah must not be severed from the mystical tradition. The Kabbalah is the soul of the Written Torah and an essential exegetical tool.

Unlike Rabbi Benamozegh, Rabbi Breuer did not study kabbalah systematically and was not known as a kabbalist. It is apparent that the kabbalistic element occupied a marginal role in his thinking. He made use of the Kabbalah primarily for the purpose of demonstrating his method; in his commentary on

the Torah, he used it neither consistently nor continuously. The decentralization of divine power characteristic of kabbalistic theology provided him with an alternative exegetical framework in place of the heretical, historical exegesis of modern biblical scholars. The mystical tradition enabled Breuer to reject the argument that the Torah had several authors.

Werblowsky's remarks on Rabbi Breuer's method are without a doubt applicable to Rabbi Benamozegh as well:

The literal meaning of the text [as revealed by biblical criticism] leads to the hidden meaning at least in the sense that it reveals the exterior structures, whose interior and true content is the subject of esoteric wisdom. The *peshat*, in its essence, hints at the hidden meaning, but the hidden meaning itself is not understood in its immanent inevitability, without the critical *peshat* that should be "transparent" in the eyes of the believer until the inner meaning of the biblical text is seen outside its husk.⁴⁹

The writings of both scholars demonstrate that isolation and apologetics are not mandatory responses to the findings of modern biblical research. Their approaches reflect growth, empowerment, and a broadening of the accepted religious outlook. The intensity of both scholars' religious zeal was equaled only by their integrity, and by their willingness to take an honest look at the subject and accept the truth without prejudice—even if that truth was found on foreign ground, far from the pastures of Jewish tradition. Their attempt at synthesis compelled them to stand in the eye of a storm of criticism leveled at them from all sides, as their positions were fundamentally misunderstood. The importance of their bold enterprise lies in the very fact of its initiation and in its perspicacity. We are not called upon to venerate, or even to accept, their commentaries as they are, but we are obligated take a keen interest in their work because their ideas stimulate discussion and thought, and enhance and inspire faith.

Endnotes

1. M.B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115–121; K. P. Bland, "Moses and the Law According to Maimonides," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, ed. J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1982), 49–66.

2. For a survey of the origins of modern biblical scholarship and its achievements, see the recent work: Y. Kedourie, “*Heker ha-Mikra le-Toldotav*” [The history of biblical scholarship], in *Sifrut ha-Mikra, Mevo’ot u-Mehkarim* (The literature of the Hebrew Bible: Introductions and studies), ed. Zipora Talshir (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2011), 1:3–36.
3. For a clear survey of the history of the documentary hypothesis, see Moshe Weinfeld, “Torah, Mehkar ha-Torah be-Et ha-Hadasha” [Torah and biblical scholarship in the modern period], *Entzyclopedia Mikrait* [Encyclopaedia biblica] (1982), 8:492–507.
4. Moshe Greenberg, “Tefisot Yehudiot shel ha-Gorem ha-Enoshi be-Nevua ha-Mikrait” [Jewish perspectives on the human factor in biblical prophecy], in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Rav Mordechai Breuer* [Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Jubilee Volume], ed. M. Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1992), 1:63.
5. D. S. Sperling, “Judaism and Modern Biblical Research,” in *Biblical Studies: Meeting Ground of Jews and Christians*, ed. L. H. Boadt et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 39.
6. On this subject see, in particular, Y. Shavit and M. Eran, *Milhemet ha-Luhot: ha-Hagana al ha-Mikra be-Mea ha-Tsha-Esreh u-Pulmus Bavel ve-ha-Tanakh* [The war of the tablets: The defense of the Bible in the nineteenth century] (Tel Aviv, Am Oved: 2003).
7. A concise autobiography of Rabbi Benamozegh appeared in M. Halter, *Sefer Zikaron le-Sofrei Yisrael ha-Hayim Itanu ka-Yom* [Memorial volume for contemporary Jewish authors] (Warsaw: M. Halter, 1889), 128–131. For a comprehensive biography of Rabbi Benamozegh, accompanied by an extensive up-to-date bibliography, see Yair Yarbachty, *Rav Eliyahu ben Amozeg ve-Hagut ha-Renesans* [Rabbi Elia Benamozegh and the philosophy of the Renaissance], master’s thesis, Bar Ilan University, 2008, 16–33.
8. Aimé Pallière (on whom see below), in his introduction to the first edition of Élie Benamozegh, *Israël et l’humanité: étude sur le problème de la religion universelle et sa solution* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1914). The introduction also appears as a preface to the English translation: Aimé Pallière, “Preface to the First Edition (1914),” in Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, trans. Maxwell Luria (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 31.
9. On the Kabbalah, see *Eimat Mafgia al Ari* (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1855). This work was written in response to Judah Modena’s *Ari Nohem*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Makor, 1970); *Ta’am le-Shad* (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1863) was written in response to *Vikhuach al Hakhmat ha-Kabbalah* by Samuel David Luzzatto. On ethics, see E. Benamozegh, *Morale juive et morale chrétienne: Examen comparatif suivi de quelques réflexions sur les principes de l’islamisme* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1867). Trans. E. Blochman as *Jewish and Christian Ethics: with a Criticism on Mahomedism* (San Francisco: E. Blochman, 1873).
10. Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*.
11. This was published recently in a critical edition by Mordecai Goldstein, “Mavo le-Kol Sifrei Torah she-be-al peh: Mahadurah mad’a’iti” [An introduction to the *Torah she-be-al peh*: Critical edition], PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2000.
12. *Sefer Ya’ane be-Eish* (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1906). This work was published posthumously in memory of the author.
13. M. Agmon (*Eliyahu ben Amozeg: Kavim le-Dmuto ke-Mefaresh ha-Mikra* [Elia Benamozegh: Toward an assessment of his exegesis], master’s thesis, Hebrew University, 1971, 61ff.) divides these references into two categories: polemical references—part of Rabbi Benamozegh’s attempt to prove the antiquity of the Zohar and the Kabbalah—and exegetical references—in which he uses the Zohar to determine the *peshat* meaning of the biblical text.
14. Perhaps he did so in order not to obscure the *peshat* character of the commentary. This is, apparently, also the reason why he mentioned “the midrashim of the sages,” and his use of them, only at the end of his declaration.

15. Moshe Idel has strongly emphasized this point. See Moshe Idel, "Appendix," in *Israel and Humanity*, 378–402. For a description of Rabbi Benamozegh's kabbalistic approach, see Moshe Idel, "Al ha-Kabbalah Ezel ha-Rav Eliyahu ben Amozeg" [On the Kabbalah in the work of Eliyahu Banamozegh], *Pe'amim* 74 (1998): 87–96; Alessandro Guetta, "Kabbalah ve-Natzrut be-Haguto shel ha-Rav Eliyahu ben Amozeg" [Kabbalah and Christianity in the thought of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh], *Pe'amim* 74 (1998): 97–103.
16. Aimé Pallière (1868–1949) was born a Catholic and graduated from a Christian theological seminary. Over the years, he developed a strong affinity for Jewish beliefs, the Hebrew language, and Jewish sacred writings. He wanted to convert to Judaism but Rabbi Benamozegh, who played a decisive role in his religious development, dissuaded him.
17. Ernest Renan (1823–1892) was a French philosopher, historian, philologist, and archeologist. Rabbi Benamozegh cited his works frequently in his commentary to the Torah.
18. *Israel and Humanity*, 32–33.
19. *Em le-Mikra* on Exod. 18:21 (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1863), 53. In this context mention should be made of the question of the "absence" within the Written Torah of references to the afterlife, an important concept in Jewish faith.
20. *Em le-Mikra* on Deuteronomy (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1863), 149.
21. *Em le-Mikra* on Numbers (Livorno: Benamozegh, 1863), 11ff.
22. "Is only the redemption of the cattle of the People of Israel by the cattle of the Levites unclear to us? For we did not find that the firstborn of the cattle of Israel from now on lose their sanctity; on the contrary, the firstborn is consecrated. Nor do we find that the cattle of the Levites becomes consecrated in place of the firstborn of the cattle of Israel."
23. Typhon is a monstrous creature from Greek mythology with a hundred snake heads and multiple arms and legs. He was the younger son of Gaia, the Earth goddess, and Tartarus, the god of the Underworld. See "Typhoeus," Theoi Project, <http://www.theoi.com/Gigante/Typhoeus.html>.
24. Because of its connection to Set-Typhon, the Egyptians considered the donkey to be ridiculous, contemptible, and disgusting.
25. Osiris is usually described as having the form of a bull. However, in Egypt several gods take the form of a bull: Apis, the well-known god of Memphis, and Buchis, the holy bull of Heliopolis, among others. On bull deities, see E. A. W Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Dover, 1988).
26. Benamozegh is apparently alluding to the image of the bull in the vision of the divine chariot. See Ezekiel 1:10.
27. In the words of Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1:43.
28. For his biography, see M. Bar-Asher, "Ha-Rav Breuer u-Mifalo ha-Mada'i" (Rabbi Breuer and his academic oeuvre), in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Rav Mordechai Breuer*, 1:1–7.
29. It is relevant to note here that Rabbi Breuer was awarded the prize in the category of "Original rabbinic Literature," not in the category of "Biblical Studies."
30. Mordechai Breuer, "Emuna u-Mada be-Parshanut ha-Mikra (aleph)" (Faith and science in biblical exegesis (a)), in *Shitat ha-Behinot shel ha-Rav Mordechai Breuer* (The aspects theory of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer), ed. Yosef Ofer (Alon Shvut: Tvunot, 2005), 24.
31. "The unity of God does not preclude the plurality of His attributes; on the contrary, the plurality of the conflicting attributes of God is the ultimate test of His unity. God is one, and within this unity He contains all of the opposites and contradictions in the universe." *Pirkei Bereshit* (Alon Shvut: Tvunot, 1999), 12.

32. For a basic survey of the system of the ten sefirot and the process of their emanation, see, in particular, Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:269–366.
33. "The reduction of the Jewish religion to its exoteric elements not only diminishes its richness and vitality, but also unnecessarily encumbers the exegete struggling with the task of sanctifying the secularity of the discoveries of biblical scholarship." (Breuer, "Emuna u-Mada be-Parshanut ha-Mikra (bet)" [Faith and science in biblical exegesis (b)], in *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 36.
34. See the Introduction to *Pirkei Moadot* (Jerusalem: Horev, 1986), 14–16, and also the introduction to *Pirkei Bereshit*, 11–16.
35. "The connection between nature and the name *Elohim* and the connection between revelation and the name YHVH is proved also from the literal meaning of the verses, especially in Genesis. The name *Elohim* always indicates the concealed God who pierces the veil of nature, while YHVH represents the God who is close to man, who dwells with him as he did in Eden." "Limud Pshuto shel Mikra: Sakanot ve-Sikuim" [The study of the contextual meaning of the Bible: Dangers and possibilities], in *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 60, note 3. For further discussion, see "Yezirat ha-Adam u-Maseh Gan Eden" [The creation of man and the story of the Garden of Eden], in *Pirkei Bereshit*, 93ff.
36. *Pirkei Bereshit*, 2:513 (emphases mine).
37. *Pirkei Bereshit*, 2:613.
38. Yosef Avivi is one of the most important scholars of Kabbalah in the world and the author of many works on the kabbalistic thought of Rabbi Moses Hayim Luzzatto, the Vilna Gaon, and Rabbi Isaac Luria. His latest work on Lurianic Kabbalah has been described as "monumental." See Avi Elqayam, "Azamer be-shva'im: Al ars poetika le-ha-Ari shikur ha-elohim" [I will sing praises: On the ars poetica of Isaac Luria, drunk with God], in *Ha-Piyyut ke-Tzohar Tarbuti* [The piyyut as a cultural prism], ed. Haviva Pedaya (Jerusalem: Van Leer, 2012), 71. Surprisingly, neither the book nor the author have yet been discussed in any published work about Rabbi Breuer and his method. Avivi's book is not even mentioned in *Shitat Ha-Behinot* of Rav Breuer, an anthology of various responses to the aspects approach.
39. Professor Jacob Katz was one of the most important historians of the twentieth century in the field of Jewish history. On his scholarly legacy, see Israel Bartal and Shmuel Feiner, eds., *Historiographia ba-Mivhan: Iyun me-Hadash ba-Mishnato shel Yaakov Katz* [Historiography reappraised: New views of Jacob Katz's oeuvre] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2008).
40. "Emuna u-Mada be-Parshanut ha-Mikra (Teguvot)" [Faith and science in biblical exegesis (responses)], in *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 206.
41. *Ibid.*, 209.
42. *Ibid.*, 212.
43. "Emuna u-Mada be-Parshanut ha-Mikra (bet)," 28–53. This point was somewhat obscured in the editing of the collection because Rabbi Breuer's words appear before the articles of his critics, even though these articles were written before he voiced his response to the question of the use of Kabbalah.
44. *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 37.
45. Moshe Lichtenstein, "Ahat Diber Elohim—Shtayim zo Sham ati?" [One thing God has spoken—two things have I heard?], in *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 325.
46. See Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, "U-Mah Haya Omer ha-Rav Breuer al Limud ha-Tanakh he-Hadash?" [What would Rabbi Breuer have said about the new study of Bible?], *Arutz Meir*, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.meirtv.co.il/site/article/?id=1061>:

For many years, Rabbi Breuer taught in yeshivot according to the “aspects theory.” He turned sweet what was sour and out of heresy produced a new way of learning, and usually did not reveal to his students that the source of these aspects was biblical criticism. In his opinion, there was a double benefit to his method: (1) he rescued people from the belief in biblical criticism; (2) he created a new, good, and kosher commentary. However, as we have seen above, our master Rav Kook maintained that there is no reason to confront this heresy, because it is completely false.

47. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “Mada ha-Mikra ke-Baaya Datit: Nisayon Birur Tipologi shel Gishot u-Pitronot” [Biblical studies as a religious problem: An attempt at typological clarification of approaches and solutions], *Shitat ha-Behinot*, 224–237.
48. Breuer, “Emuna u-Mada be-Parshanut ha-Mikra (aleph),” 24.
49. Werblowsky, “Mada ha-Mikra ke-Baaya Datit,” 233.