Ask the Rabbi: “Biblical Criticism is Destroying my Religious Faith!”

Yuval Cherlow

Dear Rabbi Cherlow, *shlita*,

I am writing to you in a state of profound crisis, searching for help.

To my discredit, I rejected the instruction of my rabbis and went to university. During my studies there I encountered the theory of biblical criticism for the first time. At first I rejected it absolutely, without even taking it seriously. However, over time, the arguments of biblical criticism began to appear very rational and even correct to me. I feel as though I am approaching a total collapse of my religious faith. My trust in my rabbis has also weakened considerably because they apparently know nothing about biblical criticism, and, if so, how can they be my rabbis?

I am turning to you and asking for guidance that will help me to confront all these critical arguments and still remain a believing Jew. (I am married to a very religious woman and we have children—if this is relevant.)

Please respond quickly!

Rabbi Cherlow replied:

Are you prepared to undergo a real transformation that will lead you to new spiritual heights, deep faith, and a profound connection to the Torah and its meaning? If so, the appropriate blessing for your current situation is “*pokeah ivrim*” (he who gives sight to the blind) rather than “*dayyan ha-emet*” (“the true Judge,” said upon hearing of a death). Both blessings express deep gratitude to God. In the first blessing, as descendants of Adam whose eyes were opened when he ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, we give thanks out of

gratitude that our eyes have been opened to new spiritual sources to satisfy our deepest yearning for the divine. In the second blessing, on the other hand, we bless God, out of pain, when a tragedy has occurred. The decision is essentially yours. Your eyes have been opened to see things that you had not been exposed to before. This experience can blind the eyes of the wise and distort the opinions of the righteous. However, it can also deepen your faith, your understanding of the Bible, your fear of God, and your observance of the commandments. It all depends on what you choose to do, and how you choose to make use of the new world that has been revealed to you. Two paths lie in front of you: light and darkness. Choose life. Not out of fear or anxiety, not by closing your eyes, but by opening them wide, by "changing the ending of the story," by transforming the darkness of criticism into the light of Torah.

Biblical criticism, as its name implies, is a method of critically reading the Bible. However, the word "criticism" can sometimes be misleading. We naturally associate the word "criticism" with the feelings of the critic, who, detached from the written text, evaluates its quality, authenticity, coherency, and morality. Moreover, the word "criticism" has a negative connotation; the critic reacts negatively to what is critiqued. When that is truly the case, one must keep a distance from the conceit of criticism that considers itself competent to stand in judgment of the holy Torah. We are committed to the Torah and this commitment is not conditioned upon the Torah's ability to pass the test of our critique.

In reality, however, and in keeping with the fundamental meaning of the word "criticism," biblical critics do not discuss whether the Bible is good or bad, or evaluate it according to predetermined criteria. The biblical critic reads the Bible with a critical eye, examining it from the outside, attempting to answer basic questions asked by the Torah itself, through the eyes of an external observer. The critic's fundamental task is to attempt to derive from within the Torah what the Torah itself says about itself. He attempts to read the Torah without preconceived ideas (as far as it is possible) or ulterior purposes, with honesty and integrity, and to examine what is in fact written in the Torah. He asks if the Torah itself indicates the date of its composition, the identity of its author, or the way in which it was given or passed down, among other questions that can be answered from within the Torah itself. It would seem therefore that biblical criticism can be approached as an aide to better understanding the Torah.

However, this is a very naïve, simplistic, and perhaps even deceptive presentation of biblical criticism. There is no doubt that many of the founders of biblical criticism deliberately intended to undermine the sanctity of the

Bible by proving that what the Torah says about itself—and certainly what the tradition says about it—is wrong, impossible, and misleading. They aimed to prove that the Torah did not emanate from one source, that its many authors lived long after its purported date, that the events recorded in it could not have occurred in the biblical period, and—above all—that it was the product of human creativity, not divine revelation. Some of the biggest supporters of biblical criticism had a very clear agenda: to destroy belief in the Bible, and thereby destroy faith that God is the source of the Bible. Some followers of biblical criticism did not share these motives. However, they presented their readings of the Bible as unprejudiced (which is, of course, impossible) and thereby undermined principles of faith and tradition. Biblical criticism joined the list of other opponents of faith—philosophers and Darwinists, archeologists and philologists, Assyriologists and physical scientists—and led to heresy and loss of faith in the Torah. For this reason, biblical criticism was regarded by religious Jews as the most heinous of spiritual outlooks and scholarly methods. It hit at the heart of the most sacred aspect of Judaism: the book of books, the holy of holies, the root of faith, and the lasting impression of divine revelation to humanity. The image of biblical criticism is so tarnished that it is not considered worth learning. In the vast majority of yeshivas, of every type and every denomination, biblical criticism is completely ignored. I would estimate that the overwhelming majority of yeshiva students are unaware of its existence even on the most basic level. They have never heard of the questions it raises or the proofs that it supplies; they do not analyze the simple meaning of the Bible with the precision demanded by the critics. They simply do not regard it as something worthy of being taken seriously. Those who do refer to biblical criticism usually deride it or caricature it, to ease their minds and justify its total neglect.

This is one possible approach. From the approach to idolatry found in the Written Torah, the Talmud, and the practical *halakhah*, we find that one method of confronting alternatives to the sacred tradition is to simply ignore them. The logic of this approach is that the very act of confronting a certain idea implies that it is worthy of confrontation, whereas ignoring it completely conveys the message that it has no standing whatsoever and is totally unworthy of attention. However, evasion also has repercussions; in this particular case, it has two. The first repercussion is internal: It is impossible to completely block out information. Many former students of yeshivas and women's seminaries are exposed to biblical criticism at a later period in their lives. Convinced by its arguments and unable to respond to its claims, they feel their faith crumble. Some even harbor resentment toward their rabbis

and teachers for having deceived them by withholding this information from them. I cannot count the number of people who, having reached this state, have turned to me, begging: "Please save me from losing my faith!" Yeshivas do not even teach their students how to respond to the claims of biblical criticism. This is also the case in the yeshiva in which I teach, although my students do know of the existence of biblical criticism and are familiar with some of its questions, which I use in teaching, as I will explain below. Note that this repercussion has two aspects. First, when the student does ultimately confront the claims of biblical criticism he is unprepared, vulnerable, and defenseless. Second, the student accuses his Torah teachers of having hidden criticism's claims from him, and a feeling of having been systematically deceived grows within him.

The second repercussion is on a higher level. Our revered rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, may his memory be for a blessing, taught us that heretical worldviews were not merely the tools of the devil. Medieval scholars, for example, did not simply dismiss Aristotle as the "dark side" or "Satan," but "converted" him and thereby turned a source of heresy into a source of faith. "Cursed philosophy" turned into a wellspring for some of the most significant creativity in Torah literature. Rabbi Breuer taught that the most profound and important principle in the worldview of an open-minded person of faith is to "produce what is noble out of the worthless" (Jer. 15:19). Biblical criticism presents a certain way of reading the Torah. One cannot close his eyes to this reading, for several reasons. First, it is impossible to close one's eyes. Even if one constructs multiple barriers, these ideas will penetrate them all—as you well know. Second, our fundamental religious outlook must be that of seeking faith not by concealment, but by openness; not by closing our eyes, but by opening them wide; not out of fear, but through searching for truth at its highest level and choosing it wholeheartedly. One also discovers that most of the central topics of biblical criticism were discussed by the sages, and their approach indicates how we should respond to the various claims of the critics. The sages also read the last eight verses of the Torah and asked how Moses could have written them. They also asked whether the Torah was given in its entirety at Sinai or in sections throughout the years of wandering in the desert. The sages understood the differences between Deuteronomy and the other four books of the Torah, and especially between the blessings and curses mentioned by Moses in Deuteronomy and those appearing at the end of Leviticus. All these matters were explored by the sages. Medieval scholars, most notably Abraham Ibn Ezra in Spain and Rabbi Judah the Pious and his students in

Germany, also discussed these issues extensively, with an open mind and motivated by a genuine search for the truth. The following example from rabbinic literature is illustrative:

Rabbi Ḥaninah said: When God decided to create the world, he saw the future acts of the wicked—the generation of Enosh, the generation of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and the behavior of the Sodomites—and decided not to create the world. Then he looked again and saw the deeds of the righteous—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and he looked again and said: “Because of the wicked, I won’t create the world?! I will create the world, and if someones sins it will not be difficult to subdue him!” He therefore decided to create the world by using the attribute of justice, but could not do so because of the deeds of the righteous. He then decided to create it using the attribute of mercy, but could not do so because of the deeds of the wicked. What did he do? He combined both of them, the attributes of justice and mercy, and created the world, as it is written, “When the Lord God made earth and heaven” (Gen. 2:4).¹

What is the basis of this midrash? Without doubt this and other similar midrashim refer to the differences between the divine names that appear in the first and second chapters of Genesis. In chapter 1 the divinity is systematically and consistently referred to as *Elohim* (God), thereby expressing the attribute of justice. In chapter 2, however, the attribute of mercy is added, and therefore the Holy One is referred to as *YHVH Elohim* (the Lord God). This analysis also forms part of the documentary hypothesis of biblical criticism!

It would appear, then, that precisely this type of textual analysis can lead us directly to a deeper understanding of the Torah. This is only one example of many. There are countless similar topics and issues that commentators throughout the generations have addressed. However, the crucial significance of “producing the noble out of the worthless” lies in the ability to use the analytical tools of biblical criticism to understand the Torah more clearly and to discover its inner meanings.

Let me explain this another way: biblical criticism is here to stay. We cannot deny its existence, nor is there any reason to do so. It makes its claims. One who searches for the truth within *torat emet* (the Torah of truth) does not close his mind to these claims, but identifies in them textual analyses reflecting the most profound questions about the Bible. At the same time, biblical criticism makes conclusions. One who searches for the truth of the Torah does not,

heaven forbid, accept these conclusions. He uses the tools that have been given him to discover his own conclusions based on the questions raised by biblical criticism and answers inspired by faith. When one takes this approach, one realizes that, in fact, the overwhelming majority of biblical commentators have also taken this path. Rather than avoiding questions they confronted them directly. We reap the fruits of their labors, and therefore it is not at all clear why we are so paralyzed by fear.

Biblical critics ask, "Is that true?" and "Is that so?" and attempt to undermine what is written in the Torah. I do not ask those kinds of questions about the Torah. I believe with perfect faith in the truth of the Torah and the halakhic obligations that derive from this truth. I, along with others who take a similar approach, ask a completely different question: What is written in the Torah? We use the tools of biblical criticism to better understand what the Torah says. As I have said, this is the path followed by all the medieval scholars both in biblical exegesis and many other fields. "Producing the noble out of the worthless" is the best way of confronting biblical criticism. In their meticulous questions about the Bible, Bible critics have helped us to clarify what the Torah itself says concerning the belief that Moses wrote the entire Torah. (Although, as I have said, the sages themselves discussed the question of the final eight verses of the Torah; Abraham Ibn Ezra discussed the "secret of twelve," the twelve verses in Deuteronomy that might indicate that Moses did not write the Torah; and Rabbi Judah the Pious discussed a wide variety of issues.) Biblical criticism has taught us to clarify what the Torah itself says regarding the concept that it was revealed in its entirety by God directly to Moses. Biblical criticism requires us to take notice of the fact that the Torah contains different writing styles.

This idea inspired Rabbi Mordechai Breuer's aspects theory. Biblical criticism raises many questions about the contradictions in the Bible. Although these questions were addressed in almost every rabbinic midrash, biblical criticism demands a comprehensive and coherent explanation for the contradictions, rather than point by point answers to specific questions.

These are all excellent ways to delve deeper into the study of the Torah. It cannot be denied that they can also lead to heresy, heaven forbid. Every light casts a shadow. Every careful analysis of the language of the Torah can lead to doubt. God also included elements in his Torah that are liable to lead to total heresy, as noted in several midrashim. However, biblical criticism's openness and linguistic analysis can lead us to a deeper and clearer understanding of the Torah. This is the path followed by the important rabbinic scholars throughout

the ages in their study of the Bible. Careful analysis of the Torah and attention to its linguistic details, as well as repeatedly asking what the Torah itself says on the subject, can reveal new aspects of the Bible.

I would like to illustrate several of the new directions that knowledge of biblical criticism can open to you. I have compiled this list from questions that I have been asked on the various “Ask the Rabbi” websites. Though the list does not comprise a cohesive viewpoint, it is not an eclectic compilation. It reflects the crucial issues that engage many people who derive spiritual nourishment from the same sources that you do, and identifies the possibilities latent in interaction with the field of biblical criticism.

The first example, already mentioned above, is that the Torah itself indicates that it was not revealed in a single onetime event, but over time in a continuing process. The Ten Commandments were given at Sinai along with the “record of the covenant” (Ex. 24:7); Leviticus was given in the Tent of Meeting as explained in the first verse of the book. Numbers was revealed over the course of many years and Deuteronomy in the fortieth year. There is a fundamental difference between Deuteronomy, Moses’ speech to the People of Israel that received the status of Torah, and the first four books of the Torah. The list continues. Moreover, important rabbinic scholars throughout the ages have noted that there are verses in the Torah that were said after Moses’ death. The compilation of these aspects of the revelation of the Torah is not intended as an attempt to reconstruct its historical process. That, I think, would be presumptuous. Furthermore, history, as history, is not, in my opinion, one of the essential foundations of faith. However, addressing this question is a necessary condition for understanding the essence of the Torah. Does believing in the Torah mean believing that God dictated the entire Torah word for word? Or should we take a deeper look at this question, as the sages and many of the medieval rabbis did? What is the nature of divine revelation on a level inferior to that of the Torah, such as that of the prophets or divine inspiration? What is the connection between the personality of a prophet and the content of the prophecy revealed to him? These questions and others have emerged from discussion of the issues raised by biblical criticism.

Furthermore, the recognition that the Torah includes a variety of literary styles opens startling new intellectual horizons. The differences are not only linguistic. There is a long list of conceptual inconsistencies. The sabbatical year, for example, is presented in Exodus as a socio-economic measure similar to the commandments of *pe’ah* and *leket* (leaving the corner of the field and the gleanings for the poor). In Leviticus, however, the sabbatical year is presented

as a *mitzvah bein adam le-makom*, a commandment relating to the relationship between man and God, whose purpose is to ensure that the land rests. The contradictions between the two passages relate even to the practical *halakhah*, specifically what should be done with the produce: "But in the seventh [year] you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it" (Ex. 23:11), or "but you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce" (Lev. 25:6). (The second verse does not mention the poor.) The linguistic style of the two passages also differs. This is one example of countless discrepancies between different versions of a single commandment. It can even be said that any commandment mentioned more than once in the Torah appears each time in a radically different form (with the exception of one commandment: "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" [Deut. 14:21]). The sages were very aware of this fact, as evidenced by the many midrashim following the pattern of, "One verse says . . . another verse says. . . ." One of the rules by which the Torah is interpreted begins, "Two verses that contradict each other."

Moreover, the sages themselves observed that "words of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another,"² meaning that the same idea or commandment is expressed differently in different places. This statement raises the question: Why is the Torah written in this way? Why are the commandments not written in a uniform manner, centralized in one place, and in the same language? The answers to these questions can help us understand Rabbi Breuer's aspects theory, as well as other explanations for the contradictions and discrepancies within the Torah. This leads us to esoteric traditions that claim that God is revealed in this world in different forms and in various *sefirot* that descend to the human level, as well as to the understanding that "the Torah is written in human language." All of this enables us to understand the contradictions in the Torah, the coherence in dichotomy, controversies, how to reconcile differing perspectives, and so forth. (I devoted two chapters of my book, *Halakhah ke-Beit Hillel* [The *halakhah* follows the school of Hillel] to this subject.)

Comparisons to extra-biblical sources can aid Torah study and lead to important conclusions. Many passages in the Torah can be understood more clearly in the context of ancient Near Eastern literature. In general, it is often easier to understand a text when one has an alternative version, in the sense of "to begin with disgrace and conclude with praise."³ This comparison not only accentuates the illumination revealed in the Torah, but also explains references within the Torah to the surrounding culture. How is it possible to understand the commandment "he must still weigh out silver in accordance with the bride-price for virgins" (Ex. 22:16) without understanding the custom

of the “bride-price for virgins” in that society? How is it possible to understand the verse “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me” without thoroughly understanding the nature of monarchy and the image of the king in the ancient Near East? How can one understand the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) without a familiarity with the laws and customs of the surrounding society?

A good illustration of these possibilities can be found in Maimonides’ discussion of the story of Judah and Tamar:

As for the reason for the *levirate*, it is literally stated [in Scripture] that this was an ancient custom that obtained before the *giving of the Torah* and that was perpetuated by the Law. As for the ceremony of *taking off the shoe*, the reason for it is to be found in the fact that the actions of which it is composed were considered shameful, according to the customs of those times, and that on account of this the brother-in-law might perhaps wish to avoid this shame and consequently to *marry his brother’s widow*. This is made manifest in the text of the *Torah*: *so it shall be done unto the man and so on. And his name shall be called in Israel and so on.*

From the story of *Judah* a noble moral habit and equity in conduct may be learnt; this appears from [Judah’s] words: *Let her take it, lest we be put to shame; behold, I sent this kid.* The interpretation of this is as follows: Before the *giving of the Torah* sexual intercourse with a harlot was regarded in the same way as sexual intercourse with one’s wife is regarded after the *giving of the Torah*. I mean to say that it was a permitted act that did not by any means arouse repugnance. The payment of the hire that was agreed upon to a harlot was in that time something similar to the payment now of a *wife’s dowry* when she is divorced, I mean that it was one of the rights of the woman with regard to which the man had to discharge his obligation.⁴

Maimonides distinguishes here between local customs that the Torah retained because it accepted the idea behind them, and customs that the Torah changed or forbade altogether after Sinai, such as having intercourse with a prostitute. These conclusions correspond easily to our belief that the entire Torah is of divine origin and, as I have said, open new possibilities for interpretation.

But I would like to go even further. For thousands of years we have been studying the story of the Flood, its uniqueness and the divine promise it contains, without the need to consult external sources. Yet I recommend learning the story of the Flood against the backdrop of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. You

will find that the realization that the Flood story is not unique to the Bible, but adopted by other cultures as well, a discovery that could destroy a person's faith, can also strengthen his faith, precisely because it reveals the uniqueness of the biblical narrative in comparison with other versions. These portals to new depths of meaning have opened in our generation because of biblical criticism. We are capable of following this same unique path, to "produce what is noble out of the worthless," by turning the critical approach (contrary to its intended purpose) into an aid to Torah study.

Historical narratives are not the only parallels between the Torah and external literature. I recommend undertaking a comparative analysis of the Torah and ancient legal codes. The most famous of these is *The Code of Hammurabi*, which bears a certain similarity to Exodus 21–24:18. After this comparison, obtuse readers feel compelled to admit that the Torah is not unique. Astute readers, however, perceive two things. First, they realize the similarity between the legal codes and the profound spiritual significance of this similarity. Rav Kook's thoughts on this subject are illuminating:

When Assyriology made known its findings, many were troubled because of some similarities that were found, according to their baseless suppositions, between the teachings of the Torah and some cuneiform texts, in certain ideas, ethics, and customs. Is there any basis whatsoever for this unease? It is well known that among the ancients there were those who knew of God, prophets, and spiritual giants such as Methuselah, Enoch, Shem, Eber, and others. They must have influenced the people around them, even if they did not reach the level of influence of "Ethan the Ezrahite," that is Abraham, our father. If so, this influence must have left some impressions on their culture, and these impressions would be very similar to the Torah. Regarding the similarity in practices, both Maimonides and the sages before him understood that prophecy functions in accordance with human nature, because this nature and human inclinations must be elevated by divine guidance, as "the commandments were only given to purify humanity." Therefore, the holy Torah included within itself existing practices from before the revelation of the Torah that had ethical foundations and could be elevated to a more advanced, enduring, moral state. From a clearer perspective, this is the true foundation for the positive cultural awareness deep in the nature of man. Therefore the verse "This is the book of Adam's descendants. When God created man, He created him in God's image" (Gen. 5:1,2), is the basic principle of the entire Torah and is more important than the verse "You shall

love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), considered by Rabbi Akiva to be the basic principle. These and other similar matters should concern any knowledgeable person, upon his initial consideration of the issues. However, there is no basis whatsoever for the fraudulent heresy that is spreading throughout the world and being strengthened by these discoveries.⁵

When you free yourself from needless fears, you will be able to learn even more from the profound differences between the Torah and the other legal codes. Then you will understand that the Torah is deeply connected to the realities of the world. Although it was written before the creation of the world, the Torah reflects a deep understanding of the world that it creates and is created within. In certain cases, the Torah adopted Near Eastern laws; in other cases, it rejected or amended them. It had many ways of accomplishing this. All of this will open new perspectives for you. This is not merely a matter of knowing how to answer nonbelievers, or confronting claims that challenge our faith in the sanctity of the Torah or its divine origin. This study will introduce you to new ideas. What is in fact the relationship between the “ways of the world” (*derekh erez*) that preceded the Torah and the Torah itself? I have found a wealth of material on this subject. What are the possible meanings of the saying “God looked in the Torah and created the world?” New dimensions can be added to the discussion of the relationship between the Oral and Written Torahs. Is there an innate ethical code incumbent on all human beings, or is morality contingent upon the revelation of the Torah? These, and others, are fascinating questions.

Comparing the Torah with other scientific fields opens new horizons. When we discover apparent contradictions between geological findings and the story of the creation or between historical and archeological findings and the contents of the Torah, we should not become defensive, but rather look forward enthusiastically to what we will discover. It is understood that, first of all, we have to ask ourselves if the findings in question are scientific conclusions or merely currently popular theories that will be ultimately rejected, and thus do not warrant our attention. Not everything that purports to be scientific really is science. We must distinguish between scientific theory and proven facts. Those claims that have been substantiated heighten our awareness that the purpose of the Torah is, as its name implies, to teach us how to live, not to record history. Nonetheless, we do try to reconcile the two because there should be some connection between a historical narrative and what “really” happened (if such a term can even be used now). It is however clear that, fundamentally, the Torah is not attempting to tell us what

happened, but to show us what we are supposed to create within ourselves in response to what happened—active memory rather than history for its own sake. I would like to draw your attention again to the well-known words of Rav Kook:

In reality, all of this is unnecessary. Even if it became clear that the world was created according to the theory of evolution, there would be no contradiction because we reckon according to the simple meaning of the verses, which is more relevant to us than all the preconceived ideas that we do not highly value. . . . The essential message is to know God, to lead a truly moral life. God even carefully allotted the spirit of prophecy. He restricted it so that when the important matters in these subjects would take shape and form, people could draw from them, with great effort, that which is most useful and lofty.⁶

I therefore advise you to listen carefully to the questions raised by the critics, and remember that many deeply religious people who understand very well the claims of biblical criticism are able to extract positive things from it. Rather than negating it and waging total war against it, they differentiate between those aspects that can actually increase our understanding of God's Torah, those that can be easily dismissed, the difficult questions that require great effort to answer, and those about which we have to pray to God for insight. I will be happy to answer all the questions I can, and if there are questions that I cannot answer, we will search together for a Torah scholar who will be able to provide us with adequate answers. If we accept these answers, all the better. If not "we will put a knife to our throats" and search for a wiser rabbi,⁷ until we find the right answers. Do you feel comfortable with this approach?

Sincerely Yours,
Rabbi Yuval Cherlow

Endnotes

1. Pesikta Rabati, 40.
2. Palestinian Talmud, tractate *Rosh Hashanah*.
3. Mishnah, tractate *Pesahim* 10:4.
4. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:49.
5. *Eder ha-Yakar* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1967), 42–43.
6. Letter 91.
7. See Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Hullin* 6a and Rashi there.