

B. BARRY LEVY, *Fixing God's Torah: The Accuracy of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish Law*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001. Pp. xvii + 237. Price: £40.00 hardback. ISBN: 0-19-514113-X.

The topics treated in this book are well known to specialists in textual criticism, but this time they are reviewed not from the angle of manuscripts, editions, or theoretical analyses, but from that of someone replying to practical questions relating to the writing and use of Scripture. R. David ben Solomon Ibn Abi Zimra, known commonly as Ibn Zimra, head of the Egyptian Jewish community between 1517 and 1553, gave such advice in his responsa to questions by those for whom the answers were of utmost importance in their daily life. Some of the responsa by Ibn Zimra, dealing with minute details in the writing of the Hebrew Bible text, partly available only in manuscript form, are analyzed in detail in the present monograph. The details may be minute and of little relevance for matters of content, but they were mentioned in the Talmud, Masekhet Soferim, and the Masorah, and hence were of halakhic importance for daily life. B. Levy has placed us in his debt by translating these responsa and illuminating them with a very extensive commentary and introduction. However, they are not presented in a user-friendly manner as they are segmented and presented as part of the analysis. Although these segments are appropriately numbered, the reader often finds it difficult to read a specific responsum as a running text. This is probably not a problem for responsa specialists as Barry expects them to have a separate edition of the responsa in front of them (see references on pp. 62, 65 and 66).

Responsum A, analyzed in chapter 2, deals with the question of whether one may adapt details in the biblical text to deviating quotations in the Zohar. This is a veritable problem for those who esteem the Zohar more highly perhaps than Scripture itself. The discussion focuses on the spelling of the nota accusativi 'oto in Num. 21:34, usually spelled defectively, but the plene spelling in the Zohar alludes to 'his sign', relating to 'ot. Ibn Zimra bases his reply on a verdict by R. Solomon ben Abraham Ben Adret (the Rashba) who opined that no detail in the biblical text ought to be altered on the basis of the Masorah or Talmud, since neither of them nor the biblical text itself was internally consistent. According to both sages, details in the text are determined on the basis of the majority reading among a

given number of scrolls, even though the procedure to be followed was not explained by either Ibn Zimra or Levy (pp. 16 n. 27, 49, 109).

The second responsum deals with the vexing question of the authority of the Masorah (pp. 66 n. 88), in particular its corrections (Qere readings) to the written text (Kativ). Basically, such corrections create a theological problem as they imply imprecisions in the base text, but according to Ibn Zimra, the details in the Masorah, even of the post-Pentateuchal books, had been given orally by God to Moses at Sinai. Ibn Zimra does not give a clear answer as to why God did not prevent these imprecisions from the outset (p. 80). The third responsum deals with the writing of the imperfect *waw* in *shalom* in Num. 25:12, which is mandatory according to Ibn Zimra, and the fourth responsum deals with the unusual writing of *hi'* with *waw* (*hw'*) rather than *yod* (*hy'*). In all these matters, Ibn Zimra suggested conservative answers to questions posed to him, usually advocating adherence to the halakhah, as further explained in ch. 6. That chapter ('The Literary Background of Ibn Zimra's Responsa: Rabbi Solomon Ben Adret and the Medieval Sefardi Halakhic Literature') is intended for experts in the responsa literature who are interested in the background of Ibn Zimra's verdicts on Masoretic issues. Ben Adret, who lived two centuries before Ibn Zimra, issued rulings on the same topics as treated by Ibn Zimra, and the responsa of these two sages are compared in chapter 7.

With the help of this monograph one can see the tension among adherence to the Talmud that prescribes certain rulings summarized in various halakhic writings, the Masorah and masoretic handbooks that in principle should reflect rabbinic sources, and the precise codices which in principle should reflect both groups of sources. In practice, all three differ in details, and for Ibn Zimra the halakhah was probably the main guiding force. Levy steers us expertly through this literature in a monograph basically written for the specialist in responsa, but also of much relevance for the textual scholar. The latter would like to know a little more, especially regarding the way in which these rulings were or were not implemented in the medieval manuscripts. For example, was the *waw* of *shalom* in Num. 25:12 written in the manuscripts as a complete or an incomplete letter.

In his post script, Levy offers the reader some very interesting philosophical insights regarding the original shape of the Torah. That form can never be retrieved, he says, and in a lengthy excursus warns us against the modern decoding of what allegedly is the message of the Torah from a text that Levy calls 'imperfect' (p. 167). This issue is important for Levy, as one can also see from the preface (pp. viii n. ix). In his own words: 'Barring some unexpected and truly earthshaking discovery, one far more significant than the Aleppo Codex and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the opportunity to exercise the first option "declaring a newly discovered copy of the Torah to be the true Torah text" is not anticipated' (p. 173). This is a fine, well-written study that makes for avid reading.

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