

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

**Shiur #3a:
Verses Added to the Torah at a Later Date:
The Phenomenon and its Ramifications**

A. From "Eight Verses" to "the Secret of the Twelve"

I. The Final Verses of the Torah

In the previous section we addressed Moshe's role in the writing of the Torah as well as questions of how and when the Torah was written and transmitted to the Children of Israel. We will now turn our focus to verses in the Torah which appear to have been written at a later date – i.e., after Moshe's death. The earliest discussion of this question arises with regard to the final eight verses of the Torah, which describe Moshe's death. Could Moshe have written these verses? *Chazal* offer two different approaches:

"This follows the opinion which maintains that the eight [final] verses in the Torah were written by Yehoshua, as the *beraita* teaches: [The text reads,] 'And Moshe, servant of God, died there' – is it then possible that Moshe died, and then wrote 'And Moshe died there'? [Obviously not;] rather, up to this point Moshe wrote, and from this point onwards it was Yehoshua who wrote. This represents the view of Rabbi Yehuda, and some say it was Rabbi Nechemia. But Rabbi Shimon said to him, Can a *Sefer Torah* be lacking even a single letter? And yet, the verse states, 'Take this Book of the Torah...!' Therefore [we must conclude that Moshe wrote and transmitted the entire Torah, including these verses:] up to this point God dictated and Moshe repeated and wrote it down, and from this point onwards God dictated and Moshe wrote and wept, as we read later ([Yirmiyahu 36](#)), 'Barukh said to them: all of these things he dictated to me, and I wrote them in a book with ink.'"^[1] ([Bava Batra 15a](#))

According to the second view, represented here by Rabbi Shimon, Moshe himself wrote the final eight verses of the Torah. This view would seem to suggest that since the Torah is not primarily about the life of Moshe, but rather about a wider history of which Moshe is a part, there is nothing that would necessarily prevent Moshe from receiving dictation from God concerning his own death.

By contrast, according to the first view, although the Torah is not written from Moshe's perspective, it is nevertheless written by him, and is not altogether separate from his personality. It is therefore untenable that Moshe could write about his own

death and what happened afterwards. This view thus maintains that the Torah concludes with verses which were written not by Moshe himself, but rather by Yehoshua bin Nun.

Why specifically Yehoshua? Elsewhere, *Chazal* relate this to an ambiguous verse at the end of the book of *Yehoshua*, following Yehoshua's speech prior to his death and the forging of the covenant for with the Children of Israel:

"And Yehoshua forged a covenant for the nation on that day, and set them a law and a judgment in Shekhem. And Yehoshua wrote these things in the Book of God's Torah..." ([Yehoshua 24:25-26](#))

This verse presents a difficulty, insofar as it would seem to suggest that Yehoshua added something to the Torah – but the events described in that chapter appear nowhere in the text of the Torah, neither in its limited sense (referring to the 'speech of the *mitzvot*') nor in its broader sense (the Five Books of the Torah as we know them). The gemara suggest two possible meanings:

"This was debated by Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemia. One said, '[This refers to] the eight [final] verses,' while the other said, '[This refers to the commandment concerning] the cities of refuge.'" ([Makkot 11a](#))

According to the first view, which parallels the gemara cited above, Yehoshua wrote the final eight verses of the Torah.^[2] This perspective is significant for us since it stems clearly from a rational intuition that Moshe would not have described his own death while still alive. This view validates the application of rational considerations within the context of *Tanakh* study.

And indeed, the understanding that our analysis of a verse must not feel intellectually forced leads us to expand our question beyond the confines of the final eight verses of the Torah.

In fact, the medieval Spanish commentator R. Avraham Ibn Ezra notes that the question arises not only concerning the final eight verses, but concerning all twelve verses of [Devarim 34](#), starting with the words, "And Moshe went up from the plains of Moav to Mount Nevo..." Since Moshe never descended after this ascent, if we follow the view of Rabbi Nechemia that Moshe did not write about events that had not yet happened, then he also could not have written the four verses describing his ascent to Mount Nevo prior to his death. In commenting on verse 1 of this chapter, Ibn Ezra writes:

"To my view, from this verse onwards it was Yehoshua who wrote, since after his ascent Moshe did not write any more; it was written through prophecy."

In using the expression "through prophecy" Ibn Ezra seems to be trying to solve the apparent contradiction between Rabbi Nechemia's approach, which he adopts and

expands upon, and the condemnation of anyone who claims, concerning even a single verse, that "it was not uttered by God, but rather by Moshe on his own initiative," as discussed in the previous *shiur*. According to Ibn Ezra's understanding, a person is condemned for proposing that anything that appears in the Torah was written by Moshe on his own, but that there is nothing to rule out the possibility of verses having been added to the Torah at a later date by a prophet at God's command.^[3]

II. The Secret of the Twelve

Aside from the concluding verses of the Torah, there are other verses which present no less of a problem with regard to having been written by Moshe. Ibn Ezra himself addresses some of the verses whose formulation suggests that they were written after Moshe's time. In his Commentary at the beginning of *Devarim* he writes:

"Likewise, the interpretation of the expressions, 'according to all that God commanded him to tell them on the other side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the Arava.' If you understand the secret of the twelve, then also in 'And Moshe wrote' ([Devarim 31:22](#)), 'And the Canaanites were then in the land' ([Bereishit 12:6](#)), 'he shall be seen in God's mountain' (ibid. 22:14), 'Behold, his bed is a bed of iron' ([Devarim 3:11](#)), you will perceive the truth."

Ibn Ezra's meaning here is obscure. In order to understand his intention, we must look at one of the verses that he quotes: "And Avram passed through the land, to the place of Shekhem, to Alonei Mamrei, and the Canaanites were then (*az*) in the land." Ibn Ezra comments:

"It may be that [the meaning here is that] the land of Canaan had [already] been conquered from some other nation by the Canaanites. And if this is not so, then there is a secret here. And one who understands remains silent."

From this we understand the problem that Ibn Ezra is addressing. The expression, "The Canaanites were then in the land," appears to imply that at the time the verse was written, the Canaanites were no longer in the land. If this were so, it would contradict the principle of the Torah having been written by Moshe, since in Moshe's time the Canaanites were still in the land. The word "then" (*az*) is therefore problematic. Ibn Ezra first proposes that the word be understood in the sense of "by then," or "already," i.e., that by Avraham's time the Canaanites were already living in the land, having conquered it from its previous inhabitants. However, if we do not accept this explanation, Ibn Ezra alludes to a "secret," and it would seem that this is the same secret referred to in his commentary on *Devarim* as "the secret of the twelve."

The "secret of the twelve" appears to be the secret of the final twelve verses of the Torah which, according to Ibn Ezra, were not written by Moshe. The issue is explained by Rabbi Yosef ben Eliezer ha-Sefaradi,^[4] one of the sages of Spain in the 14th century, in his super-commentary on Ibn Ezra, *Tzofnat Pa'aneach*:

"Ibn Ezra hints at this secret at the beginning of *Devarim*. His explanation is as follows: How could the text say here the word 'then,' meaning 'the Canaanites were in the land at that time [of Avraham], but now are no longer in it' – for did Moshe not write the Torah, and in his time the land was [still] in the hands of the Canaanites?!... Accordingly, it would seem that Moshe did not write that word ('az') here, but rather it was written by Yehoshua or one of the other prophets.... And since we must believe in the tradition and in the words of the prophecies, what does it matter whether [this word] was written by Moshe or by some other prophet, since the words of all of them were truth, and all were spoken through prophecy..."^[5]

According to this interpretation, Ibn Ezra maintained that throughout the Torah there are verses which, like the final verses of *Devarim*, were written after Moshe's death, either by Yehoshua or by one of the other prophets. Rabbi Yosef ben Eliezer explains that this in no way contradicts our faith, since the entire text was written through prophecy, and it therefore makes no difference whether a certain verse was written by Moshe or by a different prophet.^[6]

This also helps us to understand the other examples cited by Ibn Ezra, such as the verse at the end of the story of the binding of Yitzchak, "And Avraham called the name of that place '*ha-Shem yir'eh*,' concerning which it is said today, 'in the mountain God will be seen'" ([Bereishit22:14](#)). From the use of the word 'today,' the end of the verse would seem to refer to a later time, when the place had already been chosen for the Temple, and was thus called "God's mountain." Thus, Ibn Ezra appears to view this verse, too, as a later addition, introduced at a time when the Temple already existed.^[7]

Ibn Ezra also mentions the verse,

"For only Og, king of the Bashan, remained from the rest of the Refa'im; behold, his bed is a bed of iron; is it not in Rabba, of the children of Amon? Nine cubits is its length, and four cubits is its width, according to the cubit of a man." ([Devarim 3:11](#))

This, too, seems to have been written long after the death of Og; all that remains, at the time of writing, as testimony to his tremendous size is his bed.

Finally, Ibn Ezra introduces his far-reaching idea at the beginning of *Devarim*, in relation to the verse,

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, in the Arava, facing Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Chatzerot and Di Zahav." ([Devarim 1:1](#))

What appears to disturb Ibn Ezra is the expression "on the other side of the Jordan" (*be-ever ha-yarden*), which refers here – and throughout *Devarim* – to the *eastern* side of the Jordan River. Since the Children of Israel are still located in that

area at the opening of *Devarim*, there is surely no need to describe it as ‘the other side’? Ibn Ezra’s solution is to see the phrase as the later addition by a prophet who is positioned on the *western* side of the Jordan.^[8]

It would seem, therefore, that according to the Ibn Ezra, the Torah was not given as a fixed text with no possibility of future additions. Even after the Torah was completed by Moshe, it was still open to some limited degree, and in instances where it was of great importance to add certain comments into the text, as clarification or to add depth of meaning, the prophets were not prevented from introducing them.

Ibn Ezra was not the only one of the medieval commentators to raise the possibility that the Torah includes some verses that were added at a later period.^[9] His views are the best known on the subject, but the same idea was given explicit expression in Germany, too – surprisingly enough, by Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid.^[10] In his commentary on the Torah, R. Yehuda he-Chasid notes in several places that certain verses were added into the Torah at a later stage; however, in contrast to Ibn Ezra, he raises the possibility that these verses were introduced by the Men of the Great Assembly!^[11] According to this view, the authority to add verses of clarification to the Torah was extended not only to the prophets, who were able to receive prophecy from God, but also to leaders of the nation who lived after the period of prophecy had ended, and who acted on their own Divinely-inspired initiative.

We shall examine three such instances in the coming *shiur*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] I.e., God dictated the whole Torah to Moshe, just as Yirmiyahu dictated his own work to Barukh. We have seen in previous *shiurim* that the image of Barukh’s transcribing of Yirmiyahu’s work frequently serves as the paradigm for those opinions which see Moshe as having no personal input at all into the writing of the Torah.

^[2] The second view invites further discussion. The plain meaning would seem to suggest that according to this view, the unit on the cities of refuge, as it appears in the Torah ([Bamidbar 35:9-34](#) or [Devarim 19:1-13](#)), was written by Yehoshua. The Gemara does not go on to adopt this conclusion, but rather assumes that the unit on the cities of refuge that is being referred to is the one in [Yehoshua 20](#); therefore, what the verse means, according to this view, is "And Yehoshua wrote in his book these things, which are written in the Book of God's Torah." (Indeed, we might draw the same conclusion from the special introduction that we find at the beginning of chapter 20: "And God spoke to Yehoshua, saying." This formula is found almost nowhere else except in the verses of the Torah that record instances of God speaking to Moshe.) However, if we accept this interpretation, it is difficult to understand why there is any need to state that Yehoshua wrote this unit, since it appears in his book in any case. Perhaps we might

suggest that the Tannaim indeed referred to the verses in *Sefer Devarim* that describe the setting aside of the cities of refuge by Moshe ([Devarim 4:41-43](#)); this would mean that these verses, too, were added to the Torah later on by Yehoshua. See A.J. Heschel, *Torah Min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklaria shel ha-Dorot*, London and New York 5725, pp. 394-395.

[3] Other commentators disagree with Ibn Ezra, and unequivocally prefer the approach of Rabbi Shimon, maintaining that Moshe himself wrote even the last eight verses of the Torah. For example, Rabbeinu Bechaye ben Asher writes in his Commentary on the Torah:

"However, it is proper to believe, as per the true tradition that we have, that Moshe wrote the entire Torah, from 'In the beginning' to 'in the eyes of all of Israel'; all from God's mouth. ... and it seems to me that there is nothing remarkable about Moshe having written, 'And Moshe, the servant of God, died there, and He buried him in the valley,' while he was still alive, for he wrote what was going to happen... For all the prophets do the same in their words, speaking in the past tense instead of [but with reference to] the future."

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, in the 18th century, was aware of the ramifications of Ibn Ezra's interpretation, as we shall see further on. In his Commentary on the Torah, *Or ha-Chayim*, he wrote as follows:

"It is not proper to write such things concerning the plain meaning of the text – that Moshe did not complete the *Sefer Torah* when he transmitted it to the Leviim. With my own ears I have heard some of our people becoming confused in this regard, and ending up with conclusions that deny the Torah. This is the argument of the other nations – that the text was written by some amongst Israel, and that it describes things that did not happen, or that did not happen in the way that they are described, and such ideas and their like have become entrenched, and one should pay them no regard. The main principle is that the entire Book of the Torah was written by Moshe, as *Chazal* teach – 'Moshe completed it, with weeping.'"

[4] Commonly – and mistakenly, it seems – identified as Rabbi Yosef Tuv Elem (Bonfils). See M. Wilansky, *Mechkarim be-Lashon u-ve-Sifrut*, Jerusalem 5738, pp. 344-348.

[5] The same direction is adopted by other commentaries in explanation of Ibn Ezra. Among others we may note Rabbi Moshe Almosnino (Greece, c. 1518-1581), who wrote: "Thus, it cannot be that this was said by Moshe, for in his time [the land] was still in the hands of the Canaanites; rather, it was uttered by Yehoshua, or perhaps Ezra wrote it. And this is the 'secret' – meaning, that it was not written by Moshe" (cited also in N. ben Menachem, "*Tosefet Biur al Divrei ha-Ibn Ezra le-Rabbi Moshe Almosnino*," *Sinai* 59, p. 153). For more on Rabbi Almosino see N. ben Menachem, *Rabbi Moshe Almosnino*, Jerusalem 5706.

[6] Further on, Rabbi Yosef ben Eliezer addresses the statement of *Chazal*, cited above, condemning one who claims that even a single verse of the Torah "was not uttered by God, but rather that Moshe said it on his own initiative." I proposed above that Ibn Ezra himself solved this problem by drawing a distinction between the assertion that Moshe made up some words in the Torah on his own, and the assertion that some words in the Torah may have been added by someone else, through prophecy. Rabbi Yosef ben

Eliezer takes a different approach: "The answer is that [the condemnation by *Chazal* applies to one who makes this statement] in matters of the *mitzvot*, as we have explained above, but not concerning the narratives." In light of this distinction, Rabbi Yosef explains why Ibn Ezra only hinted at his understanding of the origin of the verses, rather than spelling it out explicitly:

"It is not proper to make this secret known to people, in order that they will not hold the Torah in scorn, for one who is not knowledgeable will not distinguish between verses that convey *mitzvot* and verses that convey a narrative. Also, [the concealment] is meant for the benefit of the other nations, who tell us, 'Your Torah was originally true, but you replaced and changed some words' – therefore Ibn Ezra writes, 'one who understands remains silent' – for one who understands knows that this [knowledge] does no harm; only the ignorant use this for attack."

[7] In his comment on the verse itself in *Bereishit*, Ibn Ezra merely hints at this. Other commentators tried to solve the difficulty in other ways. Rashi adopts the view that the verse is speaking of the future: "That in the times of later generations they would say of it, 'On this mountain God is revealed to His people.'" Radak writes, "This day it shall be said on the mountain when God will be seen on it – that an altar will be built on it, and the Temple – then it shall be said, and they shall tell about this day, when I came to offer up my son Yitzchak as a sacrifice."

[8] Admittedly, this question poses less of a problem, since the appellation here may reflect the more objective, fundamental situation, in which the tribes of Israel are destined to live their lives on the western side of the Jordan, and for this reason the area where they are encamped prior to their entry into the land is already at this stage referred to as "the other side of the Jordan."

[9] According to Abravanel, there is one instance in which Ramban also follows Ibn Ezra's approach. In [Bamidbar \(21:1-3\)](#), the Torah recounts the war waged against the Canaanites:

"And the Canaanite king of Arad, who dwelled in the Negev, heard that Israel were coming by the way of Atarim, he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. And Israel made a vow to God and said, 'If You will give this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.' And God heard the voice of Israel, and He delivered up the Canaanites, and they destroyed them utterly, along with their cities, and they called the name of the place Chorma."

When did Israel utterly destroy the cities of the Canaanites? Ibn Ezra notes, at the beginning of this episode, "Many have said that this incident was written by Yehoshua, and as proof they cite the verse, "the king of Arad – one" ([Yehoshua 12:14](#)). However, he himself rejects this position by arguing that the passages in *Bamidbar* and *Yehoshua* refer to locations with the same name, and that therefore the passage in *Bamidbar* is really referring to an event that took place during Moshe's lifetime on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Ramban (commentary to [Bamidbar 21:1](#)) proposes two possibilities. According to the first possibility, the Torah is indeed telling us here about an event that took place later, after Moshe's death: "And the text completes its account here, for Israel destroyed their cities completely, after they reached the land of Canaan, after the death of Yehoshua, to fulfill the vow which they had made [in the wilderness], and they called the name of these cities Chorma [= destruction]." According to the second possibility, the event

described took place during Moshe's time: "It is also correct to say that Israel destroyed this king and his people by the sword right now, during Moshe's time, and they called the site of the battle 'Chorma.'" The simplest reading of the first explanation is that the Torah is recording a prophecy of Moshe, rather than the record of something which had already happened. However, Abravanel, in his commentary on this chapter, maintains that Ramban understood this verse as a later addition – in accordance with the view recorded by Ibn Ezra.

Abravanel himself vehemently attacks this possibility: "But our teacher shames himself in proposing that Yehoshua wrote this verse... and Ibn Ezra took this view in its entirety from the Karaites, who, in their commentaries on the Torah, maintain that this was not written by Moshe. Ramban tends towards the view of Ibn Ezra, and it is astonishing that from the mouth of one with such wholeness of Torah and purity could come the suggestion that the Torah contains something that was not written by Moshe. And this being so, they are included in the category of 'he has despised God's word.'"

^[10] Concerning Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid and his commentary on the Torah, see the appendix to the previous *shiur*.

^[11] By "Men of the Great Assembly" *Chazal* refer ([Avot 1:4](#) and elsewhere) to the period starting with the time of Ezra and Nechemia, and continuing on into the Second Temple Period, until the time of Shimon ha-Tzaddik – i.e., 5th-3rd century B.C.E.