

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

Shiur #5c: Authorship of the Books of the Prophets and Writings

C. Redundancies and Contradictions in the Books of the Prophets

We have already addressed at length the phenomenon of seeming redundancies and contradictions in the Books of the Torah, as well as two different approaches to explaining them: the documentary hypothesis, and the "aspects approach" of Rav Mordechai Breuer. Is this discussion relevant also to the prophetic literature?

Clearly, the phenomena exist in these Books, too, with contradictions between chapters, as well as within literary units themselves. For instance, we see a series of contradictions in the chapters describing the establishment of the monarchy in *Sefer Shmuel* (*Shmuel* I, Chapters 8-17). Let us examine some of them.

1. In 7:13 we read, "The Philistines were subdued and came no more into the territory of Israel, and God's hand was against the Philistines all the days of Shmuel." This suggests that during the latter period of Shmuel's leadership, the Philistines were no longer an enemy that threatened Israel. However, in 9:16 God tells Shmuel: "Tomorrow at about this time I will send you a man from the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him as prince over My people, Israel, and he shall save My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have looked upon My people, for their cry has come to Me." The situation becomes further complicated when later on, in Shmuel's parting speech, he describes the nation's request for a king as resulting from a threat that emerged from a completely different direction: "And when you saw that Nachash, king of the children of Ammon, came against you, you said to me, No, let a king rule over us" (12:12).
2. Chapter 10 concludes with a description of Shaul's coronation by all of Israel: "And all the people shouted and said, 'Long live the king!'" (verse 24). Nevertheless, immediately afterwards, we read of the attack by Nachash the Ammonite on the inhabitants of Yavesh Gil'ad, and subsequent events create the impression that Shaul's coronation never happened. The people of Yavesh Gil'ad ask for time in order to see if anyone will help them: "We shall send messengers throughout the territory of Israel, and if there is none to save us, we will come out to you" (11:3). The messengers do not head directly for Shaul, but rather travel throughout the land. When they reach Giv'at Shaul they bring their message to the inhabitants, and it is only by chance that Shaul happens to arrive and hear of what is going on: "Then the messengers came to Giv'at Shaul, and they told these things to the listening people, and all the people raised their voices and wept. And behold, Shaul came after the herd from the field, and Shaul said: What ails the people, that they weep? And they told him the news of the people of Yavesh" (ibid. 4-5). How is it possible that after Shaul becomes

king, no one comes directly to him to tell him what has happened? How is it that he is out herding his cattle in the field?

3. In chapter 13, Shaul offers the sacrifices before Shmuel arrives, despite the explicit command that he had received to wait for the prophet to arrive. Shmuel rebukes Shaul and tells him that the monarchy is to be taken from him and given to someone else: "Shmuel said to Shaul, You have acted foolishly; you have not observed the command of the Lord your God, which He commanded you; for now God would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom will not endure; God has sought Himself a man after His own heart, and God has appointed him as a prince over His people, since you did not observe that which God commanded you" (verses 13-14). Afterwards, however, when Shaul fails again to observe a Divine command, in the war against Amalek, and God says, "I regret that I set up Shaul as king, for he has turned away from following Me, and has not performed My commandments," Shmuel's response is surprising: "It grieved Shmuel and he cried out to God all night" (15:11) – even though he himself had previously given Shaul exactly the same message!
4. In chapter 16, an evil spirit torments Shaul. His servants propose that David be brought to play on the lyre, to dissipate his mood, and a strong connection is forged between them: "David came to Shaul and stood before him, and he loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer" (verse 21). But afterwards, when Goliath is taunting the Israelite camp, David presents himself before Shaul and Shaul does not recognize him. Furthermore, the end of the chapter records Shaul as asking about the identity of the soldier who defeated Goliath: "And when Shaul saw David going out against the Philistine, he said to Avner, the captain of the host: Avner, whose son is this youth? And Avner said, By your life, O king, I do not know. And the king said: Inquire as to whose son the young man is. And when David returned from smiting the Philistine, Avner took him and brought him before Shaul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Shaul said to him, Whose son are you, lad? And David said, The son of your servant, Yishai, of Beit Lechem." How is it possible that Shaul does not recognize David if we were previously told that he was his armor-bearer, and that he "loved him greatly"?

The Bible critics maintain that these and other contradictions arise from the fact that the text is actually a compilation of different sources,^[1] yet as we saw in our discussion on the Books of the Torah, doubts can and have been raised as to the degree to which the attempted explanation of the Bible critics actually solves the difficulties. Since I have already discussed at length the "aspects approach" of Rav Mordechai Breuer to similar literary problems in the Torah itself, I will propose here briefly a general solution to the questions above. According to the aspects approach, the text seeks to illuminate different dimensions and perspectives on the narratives, and does so by combining overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, accounts.

Without embarking on a lengthy discussion of all the details,^[2] we may note that these chapters display a dual character, with two different perspectives on the

monarchy. In chapter 8, Shmuel is adamantly opposed to the nation's demand for a king. God, too, takes a dim view of the demand and tells Shmuel,

"For it is not you that they have rejected; rather, they have rejected Me from ruling over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt, and until this day, in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods – so they are doing also to you." ([Shmuel I 8:7-8](#))

Nevertheless, God does not reject the demand outright, and ultimately acquiesces. In chapter 9, in contrast, Shaul's appointment is presented as a decision originating with God Himself, Who – in the face of the crisis facing the people – decides to save them by the hand of a "prince":

"And God had revealed to Shmuel a day before Shaul arrived, saying, Tomorrow at about this time I will send you a man from the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him as prince over My people, Israel, and he shall save My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have looked upon My people, for their cry has come to Me." (9:15-16)

This ambiguous treatment reflects the fact that throughout all the Books of *Tanakh*, the attitude towards the monarchy is a complex one. On the one hand, there are many instances where the monarchy is viewed in a positive light. For instance, going back as far as the forefathers, we find that God tells Avraham, "I shall make nations of you, and kings shall emerge from you" ([Bereishit 17:6](#)); similarly, Yaakov is told, "a nation and a company of nations shall arise from you, and kings shall emerge from your loins" (ibid. 35:11).

Of particular note is the positive attitude towards the concept of a monarchy that we find in the concluding chapters of *Sefer Shoftim*, with its description of the deplorable level to which Bnei Yisrael have fallen, including idolatry ([Shoftim 17](#), Mikha's idol); sexual immorality (ibid. 19, the concubine in Giv'a); and murder (ibid. 20-21, the war against Binyamin). This reality is explained in a repeated verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (ibid. 17:6; 21:25; see also 18:1; 19:1). We may say that *Sefer Shoftim* ends on a note of crying out for a king, perceiving the monarchy as a solution to the anarchy reigning in political, religious, and moral spheres. Indeed, a king has the power to lead Am Yisrael in the path of Divine service, as did such worthy kings as David, Yehoshafat, and Yoshiyahu.

On the other hand, there are other places where the Biblical text warns of the dangers inherent in monarchy. The main idea is summed up in Gidon's words after the people offer that he reign, founding a sort of dynasty in which he and his sons will rule over Israel: "I shall not rule over you, nor shall my sons rule of you; God shall rule over you" ([Shoftim 8:23](#)). Notably in the Torah itself, up until *Sefer Devarim*, the highest office in Israel is that of '*nasi*' (prince) ([Shemot22:27](#); [Vayikra 4:22](#)). The danger of appointing a king – i.e., the concentration of tremendous power in the hands of a single person – is clear: if the king is driven by improper motives, he may cause a complete collapse of the

entire nation's Divine service, as indeed happened under such kings as Yerovam ben Nevat and Achav.

The same complexity characterizes the unit in the Torah setting forth the appointment of the king:

"When you come to the land which the Lord your God gives to you, and you take possession of it and settle in it, and you will say, 'Let us appoint a king over us, like all the nations around us' – you shall surely appoint over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose; from among your brethren shall you appoint a king over you; you cannot appoint over you a foreign man who is not of your brethren." ([Devarim 17:14-15](#))

It is not clear whether this is meant as a command to appoint a king, or as license to do so. *Chazal* are divided in this regard:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: There are three commandments which Bnei Yisrael were commanded upon their entry into the land: to appoint a king; to cut off the descendants of Amalek; and to build the Temple. Rabbi Nehorai said: This unit [concerning the king] was said only to pacify their discontent, as it is written, 'And you shall say, Let us appoint a king over ourselves.'"^[3]

We may therefore say that this controversy reflects the two different perspectives presented throughout *Tanakh*. A monarchy offers both risks and opportunities, advantages and disadvantages. The *Tanakh* expresses this complexity by means of a dual presentation of the chapters in *Sefer Shmuel* pertaining to the monarchy. The one aspect, starting in chapter 8, introduces the subject from the point of view that the monarchy is essentially a negative phenomenon and one that is permitted only as a concession to human weakness. The second aspect, starting in chapter 9, emerges from a view of the monarchy as a positive institution which was intended by God from the outset. The following chapters are divided along the lines of these two approaches, with events such as a failure on Shaul's part or an encounter between him and David being viewed from both perspectives. The scope of our present discussion does not allow for a detailed presentation of this division.^[4] Suffice it to note, in light of this example, that concerning the other Books of *Tanakh*, too, there is room to suggest that there is deliberate repetition in some chapters, arising not from diverse sources that have been collated by an editor, but rather from a deliberate attempt to follow the example of the Torah in presenting a fuller picture by providing different perspectives on the same reality.

Let us now examine an example of internal contradictions and redundancies within the same textual unit. In the description of the crossing of the Jordan in [Yehoshua 3-4](#), there are several contradictions.

1. In chapter 3, Yehoshua addresses the people and tells them of the miracle that is going to happen when they cross the Jordan (verses 9-13). As part of his

speech, he commands them, seemingly of his own initiative, "And now, take yourselves twelve men of the tribes of Israel, one man for each tribe" (verse 12). Later on, after they have crossed the Jordan, God appears to Yehoshua with a command that is formulated in almost exactly the same language: "Take yourselves from the people twelve men, one man for each tribe. And command them, saying: Take yourselves from this place, from the midst of the Jordan, from where the feet of the *kohanim* stood firm, twelve stones, and you shall carry them over with you, and leave them in your lodging place where you will lodge tonight" (4:23). Why is there a need for a command to choose men from amongst the nation if Yehoshua had already issued this command prior to the crossing of the Jordan?

2. The chronology as presented in the text suggests that after Yehoshua's speech to the people, they did indeed cross over the Jordan, and afterwards God addressed Yehoshua with the above command: "All of Israel passed over on dry land, until all of the nation had finished crossing over the Jordan. And it was, when the entire nation had passed over the Jordan, that God spoke to Yehoshua, saying..." (3:17-4:1). Thereafter, Bnei Yisrael fulfill the commandment and set up the pile of stones at the lodge: "And Bnei Yisrael did so, as Yehoshua had commanded, and they carried twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as God had spoken to Yehoshua, for the number of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael, and they carried them over with them to the lodge, and laid them down there" (4:8). But afterwards, the text reverts to the previous situation: "And the *kohanim*, who bore the Ark, stood in the midst of the Jordan, until the entire episode was finished, which God had commanded Yehoshua to speak to the people, in accordance with all that Moshe had commanded Yehoshua, and the people hastened and crossed over" (verse 10).
3. There is also repetition in relation to the *kohanim*. First we read of the *kohanim*, bearing the Ark, emerging from the Jordan: "And the *kohanim*, who bore the Ark, stood in the midst of the Jordan... and the people hastened and crossed over. And it was, when all the nation had finished crossing over, that the Ark of God passed over, and the *kohanim*, before the people" (ibid. 10-11). Then we find a closing verse: "On that day God magnified Yehoshua in the eyes of all of Israel, and they feared him as they had feared Moshe, all the days of his life" (ibid. 14). Yet, once it appears that the entire episode is over, the text returns to the description of the *kohanim's* exit from the Jordan: "And God said to Yehoshua, saying: Command the *kohanim*, who bear the Ark of Testimony, and let them come up from the Jordan. And Yehoshua commanded the *kohanim*, saying, Come up from the Jordan. And it was, when the *kohanim*, bearing the Ark of God's Covenant, arose from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the *kohanim's* feet were lifted onto the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and flowed over all their banks, as they did before" (ibid. 15-18).
4. The repetition continues with a two-fold explanation as to the need for the twelve stones taken by the representatives of the tribes. First we read, "In order that this might be a sign in your midst, that when your children ask in the future, saying, What are these stones to you? Then you shall say to them, That the

waters of the Jordan were cut off before the Ark of God's Covenant; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off; and these stones shall be a memorial for *Bnei Yisrael* forever" (4:6-7). Later on, after the second description of the *kohanim* emerging from the Jordan, the same description is repeated: "And he said to *Bnei Yisrael*, saying, When your children ask their fathers in the future, saying, What are these stones? Then you shall make known to your children, saying: Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you, until you had passed over, as the Lord God did at the Reed Sea, which He dried up before us until we had passed over"(ibid. 21-23). The establishment of the monument of stones likewise appears twice (verses 8, 20).

Here again, Bible critics over the generations have raised suggestions as to how the various verses represent different sources, without any such division successfully solving the issue.^[5] Here, too, it seems that the aspects approach may be utilized to show how the text endeavors, by means of overlapping descriptions, to convey the different aspects of the miracle.^[6] The story itself offers three distinct perspectives:

1. The consciousness amongst *Am Yisrael* of Divine Providence: "In order that this may be a sign in your midst... and these stones shall be a memorial to Bnei Yisrael forever" (4:6-7), and later on, "in order that you will fear the Lord your God all the days" (ibid. 24).
2. Yehoshua's personal status amongst the people: At the beginning we read, "This day I have started to magnify you in the eyes of all of Israel, that they may know that as I was with Moshe – so I will be with you" (3:7). By the end of the dramatic crossing of the Jordan, this aim has indeed been attained: "On that day God magnified Yehoshua in the eyes of all of Israel, and they feared him as they had feared Moshe, all the days of his life" (4:14).
3. The message to the other nations: "In order that all the people of the earth may know the hand of God, that it is mighty" (verse 24).

Here again, our discussion does not allow for an elaboration of the way in which these three perspectives are interwoven in the chapter. We may, however, concur that "their integration naturally brings about repetitions which illuminate, in each instance, the different aims of this miracle."^[7] Thus, for example, the dual description of the monument of stones arises from the fact that the first time, the stated purpose is for *Am Yisrael*, while the second description is directed towards the nations of the world. In the dual descriptions of the command to appoint the twelve men, or for the *kohanim* to exit the Jordan, we see clearly that in both cases the action is presented in one instance as God's command (4:2, 15-16), and in the other instance without any Divine command (3:11; 4:11). Thus, these actions symbolize God's guidance of *Am Yisrael*, and, at the same time, an elevation of Yehoshua's status in the eyes of the people.

These examples demonstrate that the "aspects approach" represents an effective and practical way of understanding textual difficulties in the Books of the Prophets, just as it is in explaining similar difficulties that arise in the Torah itself.^[8]

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] See, for example, M.Z. Segal, *Sifrei Shmuel*, Jerusalem 1971, pp. 6-16; S. Bar-Efrat, *Perush Shmuel I* in the *Mikra le-Yisrael* series, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv 5756, pp. 15-16.

^[2] I heard the essence of this approach from my teacher, Dr. Mordekhai Sabbato, and I set it forth in detail in my book, *Shmuel I: Melekh BeYisrael*, Jerusalem 2013. An English version of the extended thesis on the application of “aspects theory” to these chapters in *Sefer Shmuel* can be found at <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/shmuel/16shmuel.htm>

^[3] A similar difference of opinion exists among the commentators. Ramban understands the unit in *Sefer Devarim* as representing a mitzva, and the Rambam (Laws of Kings 1:1), concurs. Abravanel sees the unit as merely giving license to appoint a king, as an example of “the Torah speaks here only in response to the evil inclination.” following the view of Rabbi Nehorai (“to pacify their discontent”). The plain meaning of the text seems to lend itself more to Abravanel's view, which reflects more accurately the language of the command. If this is indeed an obligation, why would the Torah present it as a description of a situation – “you will say, Let us appoint a king over ourselves like all the nations around about us”? Ramban addresses this question, suggesting that the Torah is hinting here at what will happen in the future: the nation will ask for a king “like all the nations.” Were this not the meaning, he claims, it would indeed be difficult to understand why the Torah presents their request in this way: “For what reason would the Torah say, in relation to a commandment, ‘like all the nations that are around about us’? For *Bnei Yisrael* should not learn from them, nor envy those who act unjustly.” However, this explanation seems slightly forced. The Netziv (*Ha'amek Davar*), in his commentary on *Sefer Devarim*, explains that the Torah does not issue an absolute command in matters pertaining to national policy, since such matters are influenced by the circumstances at any given time, and no absolute ideas could be appropriate for every generation.

^[4] Interested readers are encouraged to examine the analysis in detail in my abovementioned book, *Shmuel I: Melekh BeYisrael*, Jerusalem 2013.

^[5] A concise and clear review of the various approaches is presented by E. Assis, *Mi-Moshe li-Yehoshua u-mi-Nes le-Teva*, Jerusalem 5765, pp. 85-89.

^[6] Our presentation here is based on Assis's discussion (see n. 5), pp. 92-108.

^[7] Assis (see n. 5 above), p. 107.

^[8] It should be noted that Rav Breuer himself preferred not to apply his approach to the Books of the Prophets. He maintained that this approach was unique to the Torah, specifically because the Torah represents God's direct word, and that only God could encompass and contain all the contrasting perspectives in a single text. See S. Carmy, “Introducing Rabbi Breuer,” in S. Carmy (ed.) *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, New Jersey 1996 p. 147.