



**SERMON B'HA'ALOT'CHA:¹
JOSHUA AND THE REBELLIOUS SCRIBE²**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 15 June 2019
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 How many books are there in the Torah? (You can tell this is going to be a trick question, can't you!) For today, I'm going to go with: seven. Because if you look closely at the first two verses of our Torah reading this week, you'll see that they're bookended by strange symbols, sort of upside-down versions of the Hebrew letter nun. These marks appear in every single Torah scroll, faithfully copied down over the generations, yet we have no certainty as to what they actually signify, and what is special about the passage they enclose.
- 2 Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, the editor of the Mishnah, said:³ ספר היה בפני עצמו, ונגנז – “These verses were a separate book in and of itself, but it was suppressed [or maybe ‘it was withdrawn’].” By this reckoning, this concealed volume is the fifth book of the Torah: Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus; the first part of Numbers up to the first upside-down nun; these two verses; the rest of Numbers; Deuteronomy. And, indeed, there are rabbinic sources which refer to ‘the seven books of the Torah’.⁴
- 3 The numbering isn't the most significant part of Yehuda haNasi's idea though: what he argued, nearly 2,000 years ago, is that the Torah was edited by human editors and that at least one passage was intentionally deleted. Modern Orthodox Judaism maintains that the Torah was handed down at Sinai, complete and with every word written by Moses according to God's dictation.⁵ Yet Liberal Judaism has been saying for decades that the



Hebrew Bible is a human document recording our ancestors' struggle to understand what God wanted of them.⁶ Apparently we were not the first Jews to see a human hand in the composition of our sacred texts. Yehuda haNasi got there first.

- 4 The big question, then, is, what, precisely, was suppressed – and by who – and why?
- 5 We're helped out by the fact that there is some other suppression going on in our parashah today: when Eldad and Medad began their unauthorised prophecies, Joshua seemed very anxious to silence them. In fact, a midrash⁷ goes further and has him urging Moses to “confine them in chains and collars and put them into the prison house”. Moses, in a fitting recognition of free speech, refused.
- 6 It is no doubt the mention, within a few verses, of both a suppressed book of the Torah and suppressed prophets which led the rabbis to put two and two together: the two verses surrounded by inverted nuns are the last surviving remnant of the lost Prophecy of Eldad and Medad.⁸
- 7 It follows, of course, that the full prophecy was censored by none other than Joshua. This is a startling idea, but, again, it has some precedent. The Talmud assumed that Joshua not only wrote the book named after himself but also finished off the final eight verses of the Torah,⁹ which describe the death of Moses, and thus could not be of Mosaic authorship themselves. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra even ascribed the entire final chapter of Deuteronomy to him.¹⁰
- 8 So we should not be surprised by the idea that Joshua had an editorial role. But censorship is different altogether. Why was he so keen to silence Eldad and Medad?



- 9 Joshua, it is sad to say, was a deeply bloodthirsty man. His approach to leadership involved an awful lot of sickening and indiscriminate violence. In our haftarah¹¹ this morning we read about just one of the battles he masterminded, ambushing and slaughtering 12,000 people – including innocent non-combatants – who had been trying to flee from him.
- 10 This was an indefensible genocide, and, like every perpetrator of genocide before and since, Joshua not only killed but also sought to erase. Not satisfied with wiping out the population of Ai, he burned down the empty buildings and turned them into a mound of ruins: those visiting the site 10 years later would have no idea that there had ever been a city there. The slaughtered people of Ai were to be written out of history.
- 11 And, like every perpetrator of genocide before and since, Joshua was threatened by dissent. Eldad and Medad, prophesying of their own accord, rather than going through the official channels of leadership over which Joshua had control? Restrain them. Lock them up and throw away the key. Fortunately, Moses stepped in to protect them, and they were able to continue voicing their prophecies to their fellow Israelites.
- 12 But Joshua did, apparently, manage to suppress most of their written work... all except for a handful of lines, including: “O Eternal One, Your enemies scatter, and Your foes flee before You.” Oh. Your foes flee before you. Your enemies scatter. Israel, Eldad and Medad told us, had a protector, a God who would be sure to send our enemies far away. If our enemies flee before God, there was no need to put them to the sword. No need to slaughter entire cities. No need to ambush people who are already fleeing.



- 13 The vision of Eldad and Medad was deeply threatening to Joshua's worldview, dependent on vainglorious wars and nationalistic shedding of blood. When he couldn't silence them in person, he destroyed their book.
- 14 Yet two verses found their way into the Torah. Professor Emanuel Tov believes that the inverted nun symbols singling them out were deletion signs: editorial marks indicating that, when copied by a scribe, this section of the text should be omitted.¹² But it wasn't. A courageous scribe, at some point in history, deliberately included and preserved this material that Joshua had destined for removal.
- 15 Censorship is never successful. Joshua was one of the most powerful figures in Jewish history – a political leader and military commander. Yet even he could not manage to suppress, in its entirety, the criticism of Eldad and Medad... and, more than that, we know that he tried.
- 16 Human hands shaped the Torah. It is a carefully-edited account, and changes that have been made to it over the millennia are both positive and negative. In fact, there are still new discoveries being made all the time: there was one bit in the First Book of Samuel that made absolutely no sense for the whole history of people reading the Bible until the 1940s, when one of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed a few key lines that had been accidentally missed out of the version we all had.¹³
- 17 Who knows what the next find will be? Who knows whether the Prophecy of Eldad and Medad is sitting in a cave somewhere in the Judean Desert, just waiting for an explorer to find it? In the meantime, we have to read the biblical text critically and carefully – and celebrate the fact that this marvel of human editorship over millennia is ours to study, analyse and cherish.



18 But above all, we can take a moment to remember the rebellious scribe, some low-ranking official, whose name we will never know, who played a vital and heroic role in Jewish history. He bravely disobeyed an unethical order, and in doing so he gave us us a glimpse of a seventh book of the Torah, a hidden work containing visions of a better world, a world with no need for bloodshed. Men of war tried to suppress the book and they failed; men of war continue to try to suppress that better world, and we pray that they, too, will fail. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 15.06.19

¹ Numbers 10:35-36, 11:26-30

² The following sources were particularly valuable in preparing this sermon: (1) David Golinkin, "Is it permissible to study biblical criticism?", Schechter Institute (2018): <<http://www.schechter.edu/permissible-to-study-biblical-criticism/>>; (2) Sid Z Leiman, "The Inverted Nuns at Numbers 10:35-36 and the Book of Eldad and Medad", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 348-355; (3) Baruch A Levine, "More on the Inverted Nuns of Numbers 10:35-36", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 122-124; and (4) Rabbi Michael Howald's source sheet "The Inverted Nuns of Numbers 10:35-6" on Sefaria: <<http://www.sefaria.org/sheets/118991.18?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>>

³ Midrash Mishlei 26:24 (see also bShabbat 115b-116a and Sifre B'midbar 84 which describe the passage as being "not in its place")

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 64:8; Leviticus Rabbah 11:3; bShabbat 116a

⁵ Maimonides on mSanhedrin 10:1

⁶ PBC (Bill 126) 2012-13, col 67

⁷ Sifre B'midbar 96

⁸ *Midrash Chaseirot V'yeteirot*, ed Wertheimer: *Batei Midrashot*, vol 2 p 274

⁹ bBaba Batra 14b (see also bMakkot 11a which ascribes to Joshua the Toraitic passage dealing with the cities of refuge)

¹⁰ Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 34:1

¹¹ A total mishmash from Joshua 8, specifically verses 10-17, 19-22, 24-25 and 29-30

¹² Emanuel Tov. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001; 2nd ed): 54-55.

¹³ Stephen Pisano. *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel: The Significant Pluses and Minuses in the Masoretic, LXX and Qumran Texts* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1984).