PROFESSOR MARC BRETTLER: THE BIBLE SAYS THAT?

Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host. You're listening to a special episode recorded at Symposium 2, a conference held in Los Angeles, at Stephen Wise Temple, in November of 2018.

JH: I'm very pleased to welcome Professor Marc Brettler to The College Commons podcast. Professor Brettler is a Biblical scholar and the Bernice and Morton Lerner Professor of Judaic Studies at Duke University. He's published and lectured widely. And he co-edited the Jewish Study Bible, first published by Oxford University Press in 2004, and later on, the National Jewish Book Award, and was called a masterpiece in a review in The Times Literary Supplement. A second expanded and revised edition was published in 2014 among his many publications. Professor Brettler, it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

Professor Marc Brettler: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

JH: As a Jew, speaking purely for yourself, just as an individual, what would you find that most troubling part of the Bible?

PB: There are several that are extremely troubling to me, but if you want to know the most troubling, it is probably the law in Deuteronomy Chapter 20, that talks about what the Israelites are supposed to do upon entering the land of Israel, and it suggests that they need to totally annihilate the seven nations who live there: Men, women, and children.

JH: You say suggests, are you softening the text?

PB: I am softening the text. It mandates.

JH: And it's probably obvious why it's troubling to you, but what are the reverberations for our culture?

PB: I think the issue is what does it mean to take the Bible seriously, and especially what does it mean to take the Bible seriously without any comment... Without any commentary, especially without any rabbinical commentary. People take it seriously and they just understand that it's a general charge for xenophobia, having nothing to do with these seven nations at a particular historical context. But that is at least what the simple meaning of the text is. Most biblical scholars have suggested that this law was written centuries after the ancient Israelites might have

entered into the land of Israel or become a nation in the land of Israel. And therefore, this really should be understood as a theoretical law, rather than as a description of something that the Israelites did or had to do. But nevertheless, I recognize that theoretical laws can be very problematic because people might really try to follow these theories in practice, and that's something that obviously would be terribly problematic in terms of enforcing a xenophobic attitude. And that's why I find this particular law so very dangerous.

PB: But in addition, aside from my perspective as a Biblical scholar, concerning when the law was written, in relation to the entrance of Israel into the lands of Israel, I would just point out that the classical rabbis already noted that we no longer know who the seven nations are. So that the rabbis, as they often do, effectively abolished this particular law. And certainly, as we consider the Bible, and think about the Bible as Jews, is I think about the Bible as a Jew, this law has been effectively abolished even though we do read it in synagogue.

JH: But there's an important coda, which you began your comment with and what you finished it with, which is that we, as a civilization, have actively chosen not to take it at face value, or maybe even question the possibility of face value at all, because the Rabbinic reception of this law has been actively to effectively to de-fang it.

PB: Yes. And that's something that, I would generalize that particular statement. I once wrote something that shocked a lot of people, because the first sentence was, "Within Jewish tradition, the Bible is not very important." And if you just stop there, obviously, I'm incorrect and offensive. But the way in which I modified it is the Bible interpreted is really what is important within Jewish tradition. And even the most... No Jew of any stripe is a fundamentalist literalist interpreter of the Bible, and we need to remember that as well, even in the 21st century.

JH: Judaism itself doesn't work that way.

PB: Exactly.

JH: I appreciate you opening yourself up to a personal encounter with the Bible where you spend your days in the Bible, literally, figuratively, in your imagination, but you're also an active member of the Jewish community and you're an observer, and part of the larger conversation about how we as Jews experience our religiosity in society and in modernity. So I wonder, what do you think about the Bible bothers most American Jews?

PB: I really wish I can answer that, but I'm gonna turn your question around. I really wish more American Jews read the Bible. I took the Bible seriously enough to be bothered by it.

JH: The biblical knowledge of the American Jewish community is really very weak, and I don't think that they're engaged enough with the Bible to have a sense that it really bothers them. Or to phrase it differently, it's only a matter of knowledge. It's a matter of caring. You can only really care about what a book means and what a book says if you know the book and it is dear to you. I'm just not seeing that in the current American Jewish community. So I think the basic problem that I'm encountering, that I have encountered in many adult education settings, is I'll teach people, people in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, who have been part of the American Jewish

community for decades, who have gone through bar/bat mitzvah, some cases, conformation, regular attendees of synagogues, and they don't know the Bible. Or if they know the Bible, perhaps the only thing that they know are certain selected sections of the Torah.

PB: My late teacher was Professor Nahum Sarna. And once he was asked to do an adult Jewish education class, which he very much enjoyed doing. And that group had been through some of his favorite books such as Bresheit and Shemot, Genesis and Exodus, so he thought he would teach them another one of his favorite books; the book of Amos, *(Hebrew)*, to which the lay leader he was talking to said, "Oh, that's a wonderful idea, Professor Sarna, but can't you teach us a biblical book?" to which Sarna answered, "You know, that really is a biblical book." So one problem is that Jews need to broaden their notion of what is the Bible. There is so much confusion and so many people think that the Torah is the Bible, and many Jews really have no sense of what the bigger two-thirds of the Bible is comprised of, namely the Nevi'im, the prophets, and ketuvim, the writings.

PB: But even in terms of knowledge of the Torah, there really are very serious problems, and I think this is really a failure of the American Jewish educational system, perhaps it's a failure of rabbis in the synagogue too, who are not really using their opportunities week after a week to teach both the richness and the problems of the Torah and the Bible as a whole. And that is why I think Jews do not have an adequate opportunity to really understand the Bible. Think of the opportunities that are there. Most rabbis have hundreds of Jews. Every Shabbat, they have the floor.

JH: Right, they're in the bully pulpit.

PB: They're... Yeah. The bully pulpit, they are the ones who are sermonizing. But what I'm suggesting, and many rabbis are doing this, but many rabbis are not doing this, do not use the pulpit as a bully pulpit, but use the bully pulpit as, or use the pulpit as a systematic fashion of teaching about the Bible, teaching about the other riches of Jewish literature. And then we would really have an educated Jewish community which would have an opinion about the Bible; what is good about it, what is not so good about it. Let them expose the Jewish congregations to what the Bible is about, and realizing that this can't be done in 15, 20, 30 minutes a week. Offer follow-ups in terms of Jewish education, serious Jewish education, which I know people in many areas really are looking for, where people would really have the opportunity to educate themselves in these rich and sometimes problematic texts.

JH: And sometimes rich because they are problematic.

PB: Exactly.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu, for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making

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JH: You are an academic, shall we say, critical analytical scholar of the biblical text.

PB: Yes.

JH: And I think you would agree that sometimes, technicalities, academic technicalities can be offputting and hyper-academic to certain audiences if presented certain ways, but I think you would also probably agree that those same technicalities, if presented differently, can actually crack open ancient texts in deeply meaningful and engaging ways. So give us an example of a brief text or anecdote in Bible that is more meaningful, deeper, more illuminating, more fun by virtue of a technicality that if it's not taught to us, we wouldn't perceive.

PB: I think the best example of that is from the very beginning of the Bible, where most people read the Bible as a regular book, which is single-authored. For some people, that word "author" has a lowercase A, for some people, the word "author" has a capital A. And they read the first three chapters as consecutive chapters that are telling a single story. Already, for several hundred years, biblical scholars have brought different types of technical evidence that suggests that these three chapters are really comprised of two different stories written by different authors, talking about fundamentally different perspectives in terms of such crucial issues as the nature of God and the nature of people.

So if you read those chapters, you'll see that there are a lot of repetitions in them. You'll see that man is created twice. You will see that woman is created twice. But even when you start reading it more carefully, you'll see that there are fundamental differences in the order in which things are created.

PB: So if you read Genesis Chapter 1, you will see that first, birds are created, then land animals are created, then in Genesis 1:27, man and woman are created together. Then when you read chapters two and three, you'll see that there, that the man is created first, then birds and land animals are created second, as potential companions for man, and then when they don't succeed in being proper companions, a woman, who is eventually named Eve, is created.

So these are different stories. Many of the same elements are there, but they are in different orders and fundamentally different. And another difference, for example, and this is a difference which is obscured by the translations very often. So as everybody knows, in the first story, the world is created in six days, and God rests on the seventh day, hinting ahead at the Shabbat, which is going to be a gift to Israel.

PB: The second story begins in the middle of chapter 2:4, with the Hebrew words, "beyom asot Adonai-Elohim eretz ve-shamayim". Now, that usually gets translated, the word "beyom" usually gets translated as "when", but as anybody who knows even a little Hebrew realizes, it actually means "in the day". The second story is transpiring in a single day, not in six days. So you can isolate two different stories there, and that is what the type of analytical critical biblical

scholarship has done. But then once you isolate the two stories, I would argue, you have to go further. You have to see what stands behind in each story.

So the God of the first story is a hyper-organized God, is a neat freak. God says something, it happens, and the world is very, very well-organized. The God of the second story is an experimentalist. Adam is originally created alone. Only later God realizes, "Oh, yeah. He's gonna be a little lonely," and then God creates the animals. "Oh yeah, that doesn't work especially well," and then the woman is created.

PB: Now, those are two very different conceptions of God, that some people might like the first conception more than the second, others might like the second more than the first, or concerning gender issues. In the first creation story in Genesis 1:27, I would argue, simultaneously, did God create them. And they are both depicted as being B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. In that second creation story, first of all, points out, neither man nor woman is depicted as being B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, and there is a difference in that man is created first and woman is created later. And after eating from the tree, God says to the woman concerning the man, "*(Hebrew)* he shall rule over you," creating a very strong gender hierarchy.

PB: So two stories, two theologies with different notions about God, different notions about the relative value of each of the genders. And one of the things that's so remarkable about the Bible, that's actually so remarkable about almost all of Jewish literature that I think critical biblical scholarship, returning to your question, has helped us understand better, is that the Bible is not a univocal text but rather is a multivocal text. It offers many different positions, many different possibilities.

JH: It chooses to embrace more than one voice.

PB: And I think that that is a very important model for us. It does not embrace all voices. There are certain voices which it certainly rejects, and I think that there are certain voices that we must reject as well, but its model of being able to advocate more than one position in a single text, which is considered to be sacred, I think is a very important model which Jewish texts, for many generations, have followed.

JH: And it could be a gift of our civilization to the civic conversation, a capacity to embody more than one truth at once without necessarily going off the rails and arguing that all truth is fair game.

PB: I would argue precisely that, and claim that the same is not only true for the Hebrew Bible, but I've also coedited something called the Jewish Annotated New Testaments, and there, this is simply something... This is a book that just are not aware enough, nor are they aware that the New Testament really is largely a Jewish book written for a Jewish audience, but when the New Testament was canonized, it did not have a single story about the life and death of Jesus, but in a very Jewish model, the beginning of the New Testament is comprised four distinct gospels, each of which tell very different stories about the life and death of Jesus. And that also is a very Jewish sort of move.

JH: It's a powerful religious message in the time, as just today, when we need to remember both the flexibility and the limits to flexibility of truth.

PB: Yes.

JH: You've spilled some ink on finding women and women's voices and women's presence in the Bible with great insight. Personally, as an individual, where do you fall on the spectrum of Jewish opinion regarding our reliance on ancient text for modern innovation? On the one hand, do you think, for example, that we should look to ancient sources to justify women's participation, or perhaps do you think, as many do, that we should simply say, today, in the world we live in, we understand that men and women are equal, or perhaps more precisely, we're congruent. And knowing that as we do, we simply will make our religious choices accordingly without reliance on or reference to the tradition.

PB: I think that it is really important to find minority voices of all sorts in the Bible and in ancient texts, and to use them as precedents. I think something that is very true about Judaism is that it goes back to its ancient texts and what its ancient texts, understood anew, looked at from new angles which allow us to see new things, that's incredibly important in terms of contemporary Jewish belief and practice. But, and this is an important "but", I think that there are cases where things are just so fundamentally different about ancient society and our society, that we can't only or always think about precedents. I think we have a bit of a dialectic to be searching for precedents if they are there. But if those precedents are not there, and the reasons for changing are extreme or pressing, then we have to innovate.

JH: So I think that everybody in the world should go through their lives bearing their culture with pride and celebration. And as a Jew, I do that naturally because I'm proud of my tradition. And there are aspects that are so scintillating in their beauty and so lyrical and eloquent and generous that I want to talk about them all the time and share them with people and simply celebrate the beauty of what our culture has born. What gives you the goosebumps in that way when you, just as a human being, that makes you so proud to be the heir of such a thing? What would that thing be?

PB: Before I answer that question specifically, let me talk a little bit about the way you phrased that question, and something important that I think stands behind your phraseology. You said that that is really true of all civilizations, all religions, all cultures.

JH: Absolutely.

PB: And I agree. But also something that is true, and this really brings me back to your first questions, of all civilizations and all cultures, is there are deeply problematic things in all of our texts, in all of our holy texts, in all of our deep cultural beliefs. And I think we all need to admit that, and we all need to say, "Okay. No religion is perfect. But nevertheless... " and that's why I very much like the way you phrased your question, "I can have deep pride in my religion with all... " you used the word goosebumps at the end of your question. So I'll say, "With all of the warts."

JH: Yes, with all the warts.

PB: And maybe we have to put Band-aids on the warts, maybe we need to go to a good dermatologist to get rid of the warts, but believe me, that's gonna create new skin disfigurements. This goal for perfection and that a religion is... A single religion, any persons, including Jews, single religion, is going to be 100% satisfying for all of their needs. It's just not a realistic notion. What gives me goosebumps? I think a lot of what gives me goosebumps is more related to the emotional, rather than the intellectual aspects of Judaism. Going to synagogue on the evening of Yom Kippur and being amidst such a huge congregation of such varied people and hearing the melody for Kol Nidre, which I grew up with, that I know my father grew up with, that I know my grandparents grew up with, even though I might not agree with the sentiment of the Kol Nidre, but being deeply moved by the music and by the intergenerational continuity, that is a moment which always gives me goosebumps.

JH: It's a good moment. And thank you for your role in the continuity for the next generation, both as a scholar and as a member of our community.

PB: Thank you.

JH: It's a real on on a pleasure to spend some time with you. Thank you for joining us.

PB: Thank you very much.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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