

Professor Levy teaches Jewish Studies at McGill University.

JUDGE NOT A BOOK BY ITS COVER

The pig is a deceptive animal, Chazal tell us, because when it rests it stretches forth its cloven hooves and gives the appearance of being kosher (Gen. Rab. 65:1). In the past few years a small group of dedicated writers has been hard at work producing over a dozen volumes of an anthologized commentary on the Bible which, though very far from pig-like, is no less deceptive. The project is far from complete, but enough volumes exist to give a fair picture of its *modus operandi* and to draw some conclusions about its success.*

When one initially examines the Artscroll Bible commentaries, one is immediately struck by their attractive appearance. They are nicely bound (excluding the paperbacks, of course), printed with an appealing range of Hebrew and English type faces, and jacketed with aesthetically appealing reproductions of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts. The signals are clear: "we are modern" (the result of technological advances); "we are scientific" (the use of manuscripts); "we are permanent" (the bindings); in short, "we have class." Further examination reveals tables of contents, introductions, proud displays of rabbinic approbations, and even bibliographies for the concluding volumes of biblical books, in addition to lengthy overviews and, of course, extensive anthologies of rabbinic material. Again the signals are clear "we are organized" (tables of contents); "we are scholarly" (bibliographies); "we have a clear method" (introductions); and most of all "we are right" (approbations).

These messages are delivered with all of the skill of a sophisticated Madison Avenue blitz. A cursory examination (in some

*The following pages are a brief summary of a monograph on Artscroll scheduled to appear in the festschrift for Rabbi S. Frank to be published by the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal. Interested readers are urged to consult this study for a detailed presentation of the material.

cases only eye contact) is all that is needed to arrive at these conclusions, and if anyone might question the merits of the project or the prices of the volumes, he is reassured by the availability of letters from Rabbis Moses Feinstein, Mordechai Gifter, Gedaliah Schorr, et al. that the contents are worthwhile. With the exception of the aesthetic aspects of our description — the books really are pretty — all of these other observations are wrong, as an examination of the contents of the volumes will demonstrate. “Look not at the container, but rather at what is in it.” (*Avot* 4:20)

1. ARTSCROLL IS NOT MODERN. The first volume of the series appeared in 1976, but a recent publication date is no guarantee of being modern. Modern Bible study differs from classical Bible study primarily in its attempt to visualize the characters and messages of Scripture in their ancient contexts rather than in their contemporary ones. It rejects hellenistic descriptions of Moses as a sorcerer, artistic reconstructions of Haman in a three-cornered hat, and rabbinic portrayals of David and others as rabbis, and attempts to correct these misimpressions by reconstructing and correlating the lives of biblical characters and the events of the worlds in which they lived. It takes seriously the roles of critical thinking and scientific discovery, the availability of related, nontraditional materials, and the right of the intelligent, learned reader to make independent judgments about the meanings of biblical passages. With the exception of a systemic attempt to free modern readers from ancient and medieval portraits of biblical texts (unsystematic presentations did exist), all of these ideas are well founded values, typical of normative Jewish interpretation of the Bible. Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nachmanides, Abarbanel, Seforno, Chajes, Hoffman, and others all shared these positions, and virtually everyone who wrote on the Bible agreed on the right to make intelligent independent statements.

Artscroll continually presents itself as “a Chazal’s eye view” of the Bible and rejects the range of intelligent options which are available. It is not the only Jewish work to espouse this position, but the idea is far, indeed, from the attitudes of many of the very writers from whose works the Artscroll anthologies have been produced. Artscroll claims it has not done anything new, but it, too, has made an independent statement, however one perceives it. Some might call it contemporary, others might prefer reactionary, it surely is not “modern.”

2. ARTSCROLL IS NOT SCIENTIFIC. “Scientific” is a loaded word, but we intend it to include those aspects of human knowledge generally included in the physical sciences and the human sciences.

Whether one prefers to approach the creation, the flood or any other biblical event from the perspectives of physics, geology, anthropology, astronomy, comparative religions, or history, we find the Artscroll approach sorely deficient. Not only does it neglect these areas, possibly because they are outside its range of interests, it rejects them, and articulates a polemical attitude which demands that religious readers who value these approaches take note. Medieval science, when cited by the earlier authorities may be included. Is it only modern science which is problematic?

The use of manuscripts on the dustjackets points to some value to be derived from the "human sciences," but careful study of the work shows that the manuscripts never made it past the covers. Frequent citations of inaccurate versions of talmudic, targumic and medieval texts make it clear that vulgar texts have been preferred to critical ones.¹ Artscroll has thus relied on, popularized, and to some extent even sanctified certain errors in its desire to avoid being scientific. Other human sciences are no better represented. Obviously Artscroll is making the claim that nothing of value for understanding the Bible is to be found outside the sources which it has used.

What were these sources? Much of the anthologized material comes from the Talmud, the *midrashim* and the best known medieval and modern commentators: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban, Abarbanel, Malbim, Hirsch. Additional material is culled from the *targumin*, the medieval philosophers, the medieval philologists, and more than a few important exegetical works which are relatively unknown and worthy of consideration. A large sampling of mussar and hasidic thought rounds out the selection and has, in many ways, shaped the series. Conspicuous by their absence are names like J.B. Soloveitchik, A.J. Heschel, M. Buber, N. Leibowitz, U. Cassuto, A. Kook, and M. Schneerson. It is clear that no moderns of suspected heterodox tendencies have been cited, but it would have been useful if Artscroll had defined the criteria for exclusion, as other less desirable figures are cited with approval, e.g. Josephus and Yefet ben Ali, the Karaite.

Yefet's observation on a verse from Jonah was appropriated via Ibn Ezra, but, even so, a Karaite is hardly a Torah-source. Josephus, a first century historian, is cited to support the reliability of certain biblical narratives, e.g. pieces of Noah's ark still existed in his day. Josephus' *sources* are never discussed by Artscroll but are important, as the comment on the remains of the ark is based on the writings of Nicolas of Damascus and Berosus, a Babylonian priest born around 350 B.C.E., whose historical writings included an adaptation of the

Mesopotamian flood legend. Josephus equated the two flood stories. Does Artscroll really mean to suggest that Noah also bore the name Xisouthros? If Berossus' analysis of the Atra-hasis legend is admissible, why is Cassuto's work on other Mesopotamian texts ignored?

3. IS ARTSCROLL PERMANENT? Paperbacks have a notoriously short life span, and the soft cover edition may not survive another decade, a problem which should have been considered in the printing of the biblical text. But the bound edition has an air of permanence about it and undoubtedly will last. The real question, of course, is whether the contents are of lasting value. Some parts are, others do not deserve to be. But whether Artscroll is perceived to be a correct interpretation of the Bible or not, it will always testify to how a certain group of twentieth century Jews understood the Scriptures and as such will remain worthy of examination.

4. ARTSCROLL IS NOT ORGANIZED. Tables of content notwithstanding, there are serious organizational flaws in the work. There are all sorts of contradictions in method and attitude between the overviews and the commentaries. The sources cited in the commentaries are not presented in chronological order, or in any other systematic fashion. But, even worse, these comments frequently do not really focus on the Bible text!

Any anthology which tries to present and compare various commentaries on the Bible must make the ambiguities and exegetical problems of the Bible its starting point. Only after defining the (real or imagined) problems, is it appropriate to show how different writers have dealt with them. Any work like Artscroll which focuses primarily on the words of the commentators and ignores the base text turns thoughtful exegetical creativity into dogmatic antiquarianism and does not deserve to be called a commentary.

5. ARTSCROLL IS NOT SCHOLARLY. Scholarship is also very difficult to define, but proper methods as well as appropriate results must be part of the definition. Artscroll's editors do not share the assumptions of critical scholars and therefore it may not be fair to evaluate them in contemporary scholarly terms, but given the signals offered by the manuscripts and bibliographies, and various methodological statements by the editors themselves, one might posit Artscroll's imitating a scholarly *modus operandi*.

One of the assumptions of all scholarship is that any work must be evaluated in its native historical and intellectual context. Though lip service is rendered to this position,² the idea has had no impact on the manner in which any of the primary or secondary texts have been

presented. It is difficult to judge how seriously the endorsement of this idea should be taken as representative of Artscroll's real position. It is clearly a scholarly desideratum which is lacking.

Citation of one's sources is a scholarly virtue which Artscroll proudly adopted, and the vast majority of sources in the commentaries are correctly identified. This procedure should have been followed throughout the books, but when one examines the annotated bibliographies, he is disturbed by the lack of sources for this information. Interestingly, much of this data appears to have been borrowed from the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, as a careful comparison of many of the entries will demonstrate.³ Many errors exist in this information, though, and we may attribute these to carelessness, to "correcting" of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* through the adoption of erroneous interpretations of certain classical statements, and/or to simple ignorance.⁴ Scholarship also implies being correct, but . . .

6. ARTSCROLL IS FULL OF ERRORS. The bibliographical data are sometimes incorrect; the versions of the texts cited are sometimes inferior; the method is sometimes unclear. But what is perhaps most astonishing is the number of plain, old-fashioned mistakes.

The translations are frequently accompanied by notes recording the "literal" meanings of words or phrases which have been rendered into idiomatic English. Much of the time these "literal" translations are possible meanings of these words in other contexts or dialects of Hebrew. In their present contexts the literal translations are often misleading, if not totally wrong, and create the impression that the editors would have preferred less accurate translations.⁵ *Diqduq* (grammar) is anathema in many Jewish circles, but the translation and presentation of texts is, to a large extent, a philological activity and must be philologically accurate. Again the Artscroll effort has not achieved a respectable level. There are dozens of cases where prepositions are misunderstood,⁶ where verb tenses are not perceived properly⁷ and where grammatical or linguistic terms are used incorrectly.⁸ Words are often vocalized incorrectly.⁹

These observations, it should be stressed, are not limited to the Bible text but refer to the talmudic, midrashic, targumic, medieval and modern works as well. Rabbinic passages are torn out of their contexts, presented in fragmentary form to enable distortion of their contents, emended to update their messages even though these new ideas were not expressed in the texts themselves, misvocalized, and mistranslated: i.e. misrepresented.¹⁰ Some of these deviations from

the correct understanding of the texts may seem unimportant to the average reader, but the philological incompetence which they display, seriously calls into question the accuracy of the entire effort.

How these errors have managed to escape the eyes of the many sages whose approbations adorn the volumes may seem somewhat puzzling, but, again, it is the presentation of these letters—the Madison Avenue blitz—which makes these documents what they are. Anyone who actually reads these “Approbations” (most of which are actually called *mikhtevei berakhah* “Greetings” in Hebrew) will see that the rabbis who wrote the letters did not read the commentaries themselves. These letters are more like personal good wishes, character references and the like than testimonies to the work’s accuracy. They may be endorsements, but they are not really the certifications which they appear to be.

7. ARTSCROLL IS RIGHT. Undoubtedly . . . and much too far. Throughout Jewish history there have been many varied intellectual trends. Some were more rational, others mystical; some preferred open searches for answers to biblical problems, others limited their quests to the study of classical Jewish sources. Representatives of these varied approaches have had significant impacts on contemporary orthodox hermeneutics and, not surprisingly, Artscroll has accepted elements of their representative writers. As anthologizers, the Artscroll editors are within their rights to limit their choice of materials. Nonetheless, the unsuspecting reader will never surmise the extent to which this has colored the presentation of the Bible which he has received.

Classical and modern writers—cited and approved by Artscroll—defend the right of independent decision, the right to reject unreasonable midrashim, the necessity to seek out and use the most accurate manuscripts, the need for philological accuracy, the need for accurate translations, the need to examine non-Jewish sources for useful information, the need for science in evaluating certain positions, the obligation to cite the sources of their information, indeed, the responsibility not to mislead the innocent reader. Artscroll has exemplified traditional devotion to the rabbis; it has made a sincere effort to present the words of revered sages which relate to the Bible. Artscroll has cited, but not been seriously influenced by, their more enlightened rabbinic predecessors and as such has not presented an honest picture of the range of ways in which normative Judaism has attempted to understand the Bible over the centuries.

Artscroll is undoubtedly a representative Orthodox work of our times and, one must emphasize, a pious attempt to present the Bible

as perceived by the tradition. It must be understood, however, that our criticisms speak no less for that tradition, and represent a part of Orthodox thought which has been systematically ignored or rejected throughout the Artscroll effort. Artscroll will be a valuable primary source for the study of the East-Euromerican Orthodoxy of our age, and does make summaries of parts of many as yet untranslated works available in English. It is much less useful as a secondary source whose purpose is to explain the Bible.

CAVEAT EMPTOR. Not every Hebrew sign in a butcher's window means that the meat sold inside is Kosher.

NOTES

1. Note for example: the presentation of *'trlwšt'* from the root *rgš* (Tehillim 35:8); the error in presenting *shr shr*, not *shr* Radak's analysis of Psalm 38:11; the choice of the less accurate *myr' dky'* as the targumic parallel to Mordecai, rather than *mwr' dky'* (*The Megillah*, p. 55).
2. Cf. *Eichah*, p. XXV.
3. Artscroll's use of historical and biographical material from the EJ is not paralleled by a similar use of the encyclopedia's many articles on the Bible itself. Inconsistent though it may be, this is understandable, but failure to acknowledge the use of the other material is very problematic.
4. Cf. the data on Onkelos and Jonathan in *The Megillah* and Jonah; the confusion of Maimonides and Ramban in the entry on Ibn Aknin (Song of Songs), etc.
5. Cf. Genesis 2:2, 4:11, 8:20, 22:3; *Yonah*, pp. 85, 101, *Bereishis*, p. 109.
6. E.g. Lamentations 4:21, Jonah 2:4, 3:2, Psalms 28:6.
7. E.g. Genesis 2:16, 2:25, 17:16, 18:12.
8. E.g. *Tehillim*, pp. 199, 248-249, *Bereishis*, pp. 463, 434; *The Megillah*, p. X.
9. E.g. Genesis 1:29, 1:30 (2x), 2:4, 3:11; Psalms 9:16, 31:5, 32:8.
10. E.g. Psalm 4:5; *Bereishis*, p. 109; *Koheles*, pp. XLI, 50, 202; *Tehillim*, 50:14, *Bereishis* 12:11; Psalm 19:14 (Rashi); Genesis 12:3 (Rashi); Genesis 1:26 (Radak); Lamentations 4:14 (Ibn Ezra).