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NOT IN AN IVORY TOWER: ZEV GARBER AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Passion and commitment are two of the defining characteristics of Zev Garber's scholarship and of his approach to life. Students can immediately identify and identify with these features; moreover, many of Garber's colleagues have followed his lead in stepping down from the pristine environment of the ivory tower into the messy realities of life as it is being, and has been, led throughout human history.

In late February 2010, Zev Garber made two presentations at Creighton University, my home institution. His first was a well-attended public lecture on a Monday evening, titled "Reading the Bible through the Holocaust (Shoah)"—I hasten to add that the inclusion of the term "Holocaust" and the subsequent demotion of "Shoah" between parentheses were at my insistence: despite Zev's decades of insistence on Shoah as the proper term, I was not sure that a general public consisting of students and faculty would be familiar with that wording. The next day, Zev spoke to students in my class, a Senior Perspectives offering on "The Bible and the Holocaust."

After Zev left, I asked my students to write up their reactions to his presentations. In their comments, two ideas predominated to describe both Zev and his talks: passion (passionate) and commitment (committed). Representative of the students' sentiments are these assessments: "Dr. Garber's talk on Monday night was one of the (if not the) most exciting talks I've seen at Creighton! It was so cool to be in a room with such a passionate scholar!" and "Zev said he can't stand bystanders—he was OK with evil people, but the ones who say they're good but just sit there and don't do anything for humanity are the people who really bother him. You could tell that he is extremely passionate about his work." (Many of my students, rather naturally I suspect, fell into calling our visitor "Zev"; I don't doubt that he approves.)

In my view, such passion and commitment are rare, all too rare, in today's academic world. In grasping these elements of his personality and his work, my students were drawn to characteristics that Zev has displayed for decades—and that he inspires in his colleagues. Many of the authors whose articles appear in Garber's Festschrift, *Maven in Blue Jeans*, reflect this in-

spiration.¹ (In passing, I should note that *Maven* is among the very best Festschriften I have ever seen in truly honoring the scholar in whose name articles have been assembled.) In my remarks at this point, I am able to look at only a few of these articles, which are among the nine gathered together in part 1 of the Festschrift, “Exegesis and Eisegesis: Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Rabbinic Literature.”

It was the title of Joseph A. Edelheit’s paper that first drew me to it: “The Messy Realities of Life: A Rereading of Numbers 19 and 20.”² On the basis of this title, with its commitment to “the messy realities of life,” I felt sure that I was going to meet a kindred spirit—and one who also displayed a marked kinship with Zev Garber. I was not to be disappointed.

Edelheit begins his analysis by affirming that “the seeming ‘happstance’ of textual position [in this instance, the fact that Numbers 20 follows directly after Numbers 19] is itself a significant resource of meaning.”³ Numbers 19 speaks of the ritual of the Red Heifer, a process for purification that, paradoxically, renders impure the priest who prepares it. But the following chapter, Numbers 20, although bracketed by the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, makes no mention of this ritual, whose very purpose is to provide purity for those in contact with the dead. Edelheit observes that the absence of any reference to the Red Heifer (and presumably this absence is intended to inform readers that the ritual did not in fact take place) points to its description in chapter 19 as theoretical and not meant to be applied. Moreover, Edelheit observes, Moses is pictured as so worn out by the combination of his sister’s death and the constant complaining of the people that he doubtless lacked the strength of mind or body to carry out the Red Heifer ritual, even if that had been his initial intent.

Edelheit elaborates on his thoughts in this manner: “These two chapters of Torah offer us the lesson of disconnects between the complex details of theory and the messy ambiguous realities of life.”⁴ And he expands his horizon by noting: “There are many examples of leaders who fail their communities when the messy realities of life challenge their pristine understanding of their theoretical visions.”⁵ Drawing upon the work of Hans-Georg

¹ S. L. Jacobs, ed., *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009).

² J. A. Edelheit, “The Messy Realities on Life: A Rereading of Numbers 19 and 20,” in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), pp. 28–34.

³ J. A. Edelheit, “Messy Realities,” p. 28.

⁴ J. A. Edelheit, “Messy Realities,” p. 31.

⁵ J. A. Edelheit, “Messy Realities,” p. 31.

Gadamer and David Tracy, among others, Edleheit highlights the necessity of conversation as a model of interpretation. Such conversation, in reality dialogue, has been a hallmark of Zev Garber's passionate and committed career, much of which has involved him as a bridge between the pristine world of theory and the messy world of reality.

Edleheit himself carries these insights into the current conflicts between Israel (and the supporters of Israel) and the Palestinians (and their supporters). I wish to move, if only briefly, in other directions, related to two other aspects of biblical studies. The first example is cited to demonstrate how even a well-known hypothesis is weakened (in my view, considerably weakened) by failing to take into account such messy realities. In the second instance, I hope to strengthen, if also complicate, a scholarly debate by invoking the realities of life.

The Documentary Hypothesis (often summarized as J, E, P, D, reputed to be the major "sources" from which the Torah was constructed) has been in and out of scholarly vogue since its inception in the nineteenth century. Relevant to our discussion is an observation that I have rarely, if ever, seen articulated; namely, that much of what constitutes the "contents" of each source is based on the view that if passage A appears to be of benefit to group X, then group X must have written and/or transmitted passage A.⁶ In theory, this is a neat solution to a number of seemingly complex textual issues. In fact, however, life is far messier than that. Groups often, and for varying reasons, fail to effectively promote their own self-interest and/or completely misinterpret what is in their best interest. To assert a "mechanistic" approach to the composition of the biblical text fails, in my view, to do justice to the realities (many of which we will never fully uncover) in which ancient authors and tradents operated.

In another admittedly more specialized area, there is continued debate among Septuagint scholars whether the Old Greek of the Pentateuch was produced as a result of royal decree on the part of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (as related in *The Letter of Aristeas*) or the needs of the Alexandrian Jews themselves (among whom facility in Hebrew was fast disappearing). But why, I wonder, need this be an either/or proposition? As I recently wrote,

Real life is messy. And its study should reflect that reality. It is very easy for us, at many lengths removed from the realities of early Alexandria, to construct highly polished accounts of what happened, in which this or that moti-

⁶ For a classic statement of the Documentary Hypothesis, formulated for a modern audience, see R. E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperOne, 1997).

vated the translators, who consistently followed a given policy for an audience that was clearly identifiable. Upon even a bit more reflection, we must admit that such reconstructions are simplistic.⁷

While most collections of articles tend to be a series of monologues (even when they were first presented as part of a conference or colloquium), it is altogether fitting that Garber's *Festschrift* manages, at least in some places, to constitute a dialogue. This is the case with the second article I wish to look at, "Dialogue as Praxis: A Midrashic Reading of Numbers 19–20 and Hebrews 9," by James F. Moore.⁸ As Moore notes at the onset of his article, "[I am] engaging in a dialogue with ... Joseph Edelheit.... The approach we have taken, all of us, has been dialogue on texts, which involves both the effort to fully respect the other as equal and to think about our texts together in a post-Shoah context."⁹

In Moore's analysis, the author of the New Testament text, Hebrews 9, refers to Numbers 19, a text from the Hebrew Bible, but "shows a curious lack of awareness of the details of the Numbers text."¹⁰ In resolving a cluster of issues that arise as we seek to understand how the author of Hebrews understands Numbers, Moore also urges us to consider how Numbers helps us to rethink typical notions about Hebrews, thus reversing the usual pattern of reading. It is in this way, Moore affirms, that we can construct a dialogue among the very texts themselves.

This procedure, which Moore and others (including Garber) call a "midrashic reading," is of substantial value in helping to properly delineate the relationship that the book of Hebrews envisions between the followers of Jesus and those individuals who remained in what we would understand as Judaism. But there is more. As Moore convincingly demonstrates, this type of reading is necessary for continuing fruitful dialogue between Jews and Christians, especially in the post-Shoah era. And it is also a vital component of the process through which the theoretical is transformed, in part by liturgy, into practice, into the realities of life as we actually live it.

When I first began university teaching in the late 1970s, I was admonished to leave all traces of "myself" at the classroom door: "Nothing and

⁷ This is from an article, L. Greenspoon, "At the Beginning: The Septuagint as a Jewish Bible Translation," to be published in the near future.

⁸ J. F. Moore, "Dialogue as Praxis: A Midrashic Reading of Numbers 19–20 and Hebrews 9," in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), pp. 49–55.

⁹ J. F. Moore, "Dialogue as Praxis," p. 49.

¹⁰ J. F. Moore, "Dialogue as Praxis," p. 49.

no one should come between the student and the blackboard.” For better or worse, I followed this advice for a number of years. Whether or not such disengaged teaching and writing were ever effective, Zev Garber, with his passion and commitment, offers us another approach to the academic study of the Bible and, more broadly, to the living of life. Even if we do not embrace this paradigm ourselves, my experience with Zev provides inspiring evidence that many of our students and of our colleagues do—and that all of us have much to learn from their combined efforts.