ARTSCROLL: AN OVERVIEW

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Begun in 1976 as a 136 page English commentary on Esther, the Artsscroll Bible commentaries have flourished in a way few observers would have thought possible. The series has now passed the 20 volume mark, and while publication has decelerated of late, the project continues to grow. In the course of its rapid rise in popularity, Artsscroll has managed to attract the support of many spokesmen of different Orthodox groups. Few other efforts -- educational, religious, political or literary -- are able to display letters of approval from Rabbis M. Feinstein, M. Gifter, J. Kamenecki, G. Schorr, J. Ruderman, A. Zlotowitz, S. Kotler, and D. Cohen and also official endorsement from The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, strong support from in-house publications of the Montreal Vaad HaIr and the Council of Young Israel, and accolades from The Jewish Observer. The editorial board of Tradition has shown inconsistency in its attitudes by publishing a critique of Artsscroll and then, in effect, retracting it by supporting a counter criticism by one of its editors, but Tradition remains the only Orthodox journal to have published any serious reservation about the project. These official endorsements have helped the series' popularity. The volumes are frequently spotted in the hands of synagogue-goers and students; they have become standard acquisitions in synagogue libraries. Frequently given as gifts, they even sneak into the occasional college library or lecture. Why?

The Artsscroll volumes seek to fill a perceived void in the traditional literature on the Bible that is available to the English reading world. Most available commentaries, it would seem to the editors, suffer from being scientific, apologetic, critical and/or untrustworthy. These faults extend to the translations on which they are based and derive from the exegetical attitudes they express. They are not even authentically Jewish, it is claimed, as they often rely upon the contributions of non-Jewish writers. One of Artscroll's goals is to replace these unacceptable commentaries. Though never mentioned by name, the apparent objects of disapproval are the
commentary on the Torah edited by Rabbi J. H. Hertz and the similar commentaries on the rest of the Bible edited under the direction of the Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, both published by the Soncino Press.

The foremost English contribution to Jewish Bible study of the earlier part of this century, Hertz's work began to appear in 1929, has been reissued in various one-volume formats, and may be found by the dozens and hundreds in virtually all North American synagogues. Its popularity is best attested by the number of copies published, but its impact has, to the best of my knowledge, never been evaluated. Using the British and Foreign Bible Society's Hebrew text and the Jewish Publication Society's 1919 translation as a base, Hertz produced a highly eclectic commentary on the Torah including the observations of the Jewish and non-Jewish ancient, medieval and modern writers listed on pages 976-979. Hertz's policy of "Accept the truth from wherever source it comes" (Maimonides, Introduction to Shemonah Peraqim) is stated at the outset and attempted throughout the work. One might criticize his penchant for excising and including the favorable comments of writers hostile to his religious outlook, for this creates a false sense of scholarly and critical approval. Nevertheless, Hertz succeeded in presenting a commentary which for several generations has served as a popular model of the mixture of religious tradition and modern scholarship.

Since there is no other work worthy of the attention that also fits the criticisms of the Artscroll editors, I must conclude that Artscroll has as one of its raisons d'etre the refutation of almost every aspect of the Hertz and Cohen efforts. Hertz and Cohen used the Jewish Publication Society's translation; Artscroll produces its own. Hertz and Cohen used both Jewish and non-Jewish writers, Artscroll only approved Jewish ones (except for occasional lapses into the likes of Josephus Flavius and Yefet ben Ali). Hertz and Cohen identified their sources; Artscroll provides biographical sketches as well. Hertz and Cohen covered the entire Bible; Artscroll is doing likewise and (like Hertz) has extended its interests to liturgical texts, but is working on the Mishnah and other things as well. Hertz and Cohen used only English in the commentary; Artscroll translates almost everything, but includes much Hebrew material also. Hertz and Cohen initially produced eighteen rather small volumes (the Torah was later republished in different formats); the Artscroll project is likely to fill
50-75 volumes. Hertz and Cohen tried to be true to the tradition and sensitive to modern scholarly issues; Artscroll has disavowed any involvement in the latter. Hertz and Cohen addressed the English speaking world at large; Artscroll is concerned with a smaller but more committed reading public.

The vast differences in both physical and ideological makeup, as well as the number of copies in print and their relative costs, mean that the replacement of the Hertz-Cohen volumes will be slow and incomplete. Barring a change in format, Artscroll will not attain the popularity of Hertz as a companion to the weekly Torah reading. As a text for study, though, particularly for the hundreds of less known and untranslated traditional works, it is a useful source of material and may very well help to stimulate a renewed interest in the entire field of traditional Biblical interpretation. But, as I have clearly demonstrated elsewhere, the effort has been marred by serious shortcomings that call the entire project into question.4

Directed at early teenage day-school students, Hebrew teachers, college students, housewives, uninitiated adult readers, kollel scholars, and yeshiva students, Artscroll must be perceived as a major work, intended for a wide readership that includes many people who are at home with Bible study and can appreciate the comments included. As obvious as it may seem, this point is important, for it means that the volumes must withstand the test of sophistication as well as readability, reliability and accuracy. In spite of the editors' repeated appeals that the volumes are not the final word, must not be used for halachic decisions, and should, if properly used, lead to further study of the original sources, the extent of the effort, the size of the projected series, the range of the audience addressed, the project's initial success, and the extent to which the books are used in Jewish schools, lead me to believe that the editors are consciously working to produce the official, authoritative, English Bible commentary for religious Jews, one that will remain for generations the base of Bible study for all but the few who have the ability, time and inclination to probe further into the original sources.

Every Artscroll volume contains the Hebrew Bible text, a "new" English translation, and extensive comments on each verse. The commentary, undoubtedly the most important part of the effort, attempts to collect and organize relevant interpretations from a host of acceptable Jewish writers.
Supplemented by introductions to individual units (books, chapters or weekly lections) these commentaries have become the repository of what most readers assume to be the correct "orthodox" interpretation of the Biblical text. In fact, there is no such thing, and herein lies one of the series' central flaws.

While ancient (pre-Mishnaic) Jewish writings have the Bible as their major focus, this concern is shared by only a portion of the post-Mishnaic literature. As the Talmud grew in importance, it and non-Biblical concerns dominated religious writings. Later the Zohar also refocused attention, as did philosophical and halachic works in all periods. To be sure, the Bible remained a major concern, but it was usually read in the light of these other texts, and many (if not most) works that interpreted the Bible in the last 2000 years have been more concerned with using the Bible as a basis for transmitting independently determined non-Biblical notions than presenting those of the Bible itself. In the process, rabbinic tradition dominated the field and actually surpassed the Prophets and Magiographa in practical importance, religious authority, and the number, size and quality of the books whose production it stimulated. Much of this situation was recognized over the centuries and opposed in various degrees by rabbinic and non-rabbinic writers who fought to give scripture an independent hearing. Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra, David Kimchi, the Rashbam and others frequently contributed to this approach to the texts, but their commitments to medieval rabbanism limited the extent to which they could break completely with tradition. Karaite writers were somewhat freer in this respect, but philosophical and polemical needs often colored their interpretations no less than non-Karaite ones. Other writers challenged specific issues or assumptions about Biblical interpretation, but their impacts are often felt more in their attitudes toward earlier interpreters or commentaries than in the articulation of their assumptions or the establishment of hermeneutical rules or procedures. However one evaluates the individual contributions of these writers, the heterogeneous nature of the field is immediately apparent to any serious reader. Commentators worked with different sources and used different assumptions, and their commentaries differed accordingly. These authors frequently approached their very personal task with reverence and awe, as aware of the responsibility as of the difficulty in interpreting God's words or messages. While many of them attempted to
outline some of the principles used in their work, most failed to produce detailed rules of procedure. Such rule books were written to guide students of the Talmud, and a vast (though frequently neglected) literature evolved, but this field touched only tangentially on the Bible. The lack of a formal hermeneutical literature coupled with a diffused interest in the Bible itself has left Jewish writers without a field of hermeneutical study comparable to the Christian one.5

Possessing a very rich interpretative literature on the Bible but lacking an official Orthodox program that suggests how to use it, Artscroll has worked on its own. While no real hermeneutical statements have been published, and it is not clear that any exist, we can reconstruct some of the procedures from the methods used in the many volumes in print.6 The comparison of these principles with the classical rabbinic commentaries allows us to see how Artscroll fits into the history of Jewish interpretation of the Bible. The wide based support for the series gives a clear picture of how the contemporary Orthodox rabbinate understands the Bible and wants it taught to the present and future generations of Jewish readers.

Artscroll's Hidden Agenda

Some interpreters of the Bible are readily observable as rationalists; others, as mystics. Hasidim, Mitnagdim, midrashists, scientists, grammarians, preachers and others contributed to the literature of Biblical interpretation. Each of these groups (and their individual representatives) went about the business of interpreting the Bible in different ways, and they often disagreed about how to proceed in general as well as about the meanings of specific passages. In fact, one of the most pervasive but frequently ignored stimuli for most of the traditional commentaries on the Bible was dissatisfaction with the available commentaries.7 While to some extent this type of bold discontent was voiced more with respect to recent writers or contemporaries than those of the more distant past, in many cases centuries, not decades, separated critic and subject. The existence of these strong reactions to the earlier exegetical efforts is to be expected, for if the writers did not feel that the Bible said something to them that had not yet been said by everyone else, they would have no justification for the composition of yet another commentary on the holy text. And while these earlier traditionalists felt a deep reverence for
the efforts of their teachers and predecessors, they also felt able to improve upon them and to offer differing opinions within certain limits (though these limits varied with the different writers). More significantly, they stated these feelings openly and consciously involved the readers in both the exegetical processes and the arguments in order to win them over to their points of view. Artscroll, in contrast, frequently voices its rejection of certain exegetical ideas but expresses overt dissatisfaction only with those outside the rabbinic tradition as Artscroll perceives it. Secular humanists, scientists, irreligious Jews and Christians may be wrong in their statements or approaches or attitudes. Dissatisfaction with the views of the rabbis and their statements is never voiced, and the freedom of expression felt and exercised by the earlier writers seems to be lacking.

Covert dissatisfaction is another matter. Many of Artscroll's rabbinic predecessors were committed to the intellectual developments of their times, and these writers articulated many ideas that Artscroll finds hard to accept. Where questions on the use of science, the need to ignore (or at least not rely upon) many midrashim, the role of God in human history, the nature of Biblical miracles, and the correct way to determine what actually happened in ancient times (to mention a few) were resolved by early authorities in ways contrary to those deemed proper by Artscroll, statements reflecting these attitudes have been omitted. Other passages that fit Artscroll's fundamentalist agenda are included from these same writers. Also, many important individuals were omitted from consideration, giving the impression that Orthodox leaders like Rabbis A. Kook and J. B. Soloveitchik, as well as the famous Orthodox Bible expert Nehama Leibowitz, are unworthy of inclusion. Omission of Italians like S. D. Luzzatto, U. Cassutto and the 16th century writer Azariah de Rossi is also significant and helps us to appreciate the limitations imposed on the process of selection.

Certain issues are also avoided or minimized. Notwithstanding the statements of the baraita cited in the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14b, beginning with the discussion of the Gemarah, a.l., there has never been complete agreement on the authorship of all parts of all of the books assigned in the baraita. According to Ibn Ezra twelve (not eight) verses at the end of Deuteronomy were added to the Torah; Abarbanel disagreed with the dating and authorship of several
books in the introduction to his commentary on Former Prophets; the attribution of Proverbs, particularly the last two chapters, to Solomon, has received less than unanimous support; various sources have added Ezra to the talmudic list of contributors to Psalms; the question of the authorship of Job was never settled; the beginning and end of Ecclesiastes have been attributed to the editor, not the author, etc. Some of these books have not yet been commented on by Artscroll, but the problem of authorship is a pervasive one. However one views the give and take of the question, it must be conceded that there is much more discussion than one might deduce from the meager attention given to the issue and the simplistic manner in which it is discussed.

Similarly, concern for the literary qualities of the Bible was an integral part of the analysis of some earlier writers. Repetitions in wording or content received a great amount of attention as did the occurrences of leitwoerter and visible patterns of literary expression (for example as developed in the various cycles of events in the story of the plagues in Exodus). Nachmanides in particular was very interested in the literary qualities of the Torah, and some of his comments have found their way into the Artscroll volumes. Modern literary analysis of Biblical narratives is a natural development of this field, is far from the hostile criticism it is assumed to be, and adds an important dimension to one's understanding of the text. Literary sensitivity necessitates careful study of every text as a unit and stresses the dynamics of the whole as well as the significance of individual parts. The integration of such an approach, definitely in keeping with the attitudes of some traditional commentators, would offer an important balance to many of Artscroll's observations that tend to remove individual units from their literary contexts and, in the process, allow them to assume meanings of only secondary and tertiary importance without ever explaining their primary significance. Unfortunately, such comments are rare.

Another traditional literary concern that is only minimally reflected in Artscroll is an awareness of the qualities of Biblical poetry. After the observation that Biblical poetry is composed in Hebrew, the next most obvious observation is that it is composed of balanced lines, a phenomenon usually referred to as parallelism. The existence of parallelism is not a modern discovery, as may be seen from the discussion of this phenomenon in the writings of Menachem Ibn Saruq, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra,
Radak, etc., and the Artscroll translations have taken note of this structural pattern by printing the translation of poetic passages in poetic form. A corollary of the parallel nature of Biblical poetry is that it is repetitive, or, to be more precise, in expressing any given idea, it is stylistically appropriate to repeat the idea in parallel lines. This, too, was known by the medieval authors, though they did not always agree on the exact nature of this double expression, or on when it represented two versions of the same thought and when it was to be taken as different innuendos, not exactly identical.

Both positions were espoused on various occasions and often discussed. Though obviously familiar with some of these passages, the Malbim frequently rejected as out of hand the possibility that there could be any sort of repetition in the Bible and that one might properly assume, like the earlier masters, that any two lines actually say the same thing. This approach necessitated a careful analysis of the Hebrew lexicon and has enriched our understanding of Hebrew synonyms. But it might have been tempered with the observation of the earlier writers that there is such a phenomenon as "repetition of the same idea in different words." While the Artscroll volumes occasionally discuss the problem as it relates to individual passages, this issue, important as it once was and still is, does not receive the attention it deserves. This gives the impression that the only valid approach to Biblical poetry is that of the Malbim, who categorically denied the possibility of such a literary form. Interestingly, the lack of complete commentaries by the Malbim and Hirsch (who also engaged in such linguistic endeavors) on Lamentations has visibly altered this aspect of the Artscroll presentation of that book.

Anyone versed in Jewish Biblical interpretation will thus observe that Artscroll has taken the step of choosing those rabbinic exegetical procedures it finds most appropriate and rejecting those it opposes, but unlike many of its predecessors it has not explained the criteria for selection or openly discussed and refuted the positions it rejected. The reader is led through a selection of explanations and told what the texts mean. He is not involved in the processes of interpretation, is not expected to understand how the interpretations were derived, and is not encouraged to choose the approach that suits him best. Surely few readers can appreciate the extent to which this process has colored the presentation of the Bible they have received.
Like precious pearls that have been stimulated by some irritant in the oyster, so are many of the midrashim and traditional exegetical comments stimulated by (real or apparent) ambiguities, questions, grammatical difficulties, or contradictions. It is these problems or questions that have engaged all who would explain the text and have, to a large extent, shaped their understanding of it. Of course there are other factors, and all writers did not address themselves to all of the problems, nor did they necessarily agree on what the problems were, but it is the problems, the irritants if you will, that lie behind the interpretative literature, and these problems must be presented, defined, and solved.

The definition of the problem before its solution has not always been part of the classical commentaries. Indeed one of the main concerns in the study of Rashi has always been defining the problems that gave rise to his comments. Nonetheless, there are models like the commentaries of Abarbanel and Rabbi Isaac Caro where the problems are clearly defined, and this must be the pattern of any anthology that would compare the comments of various writers on the same phrase or word. This procedure would give definiton to the verse and would clearly focus on the issues in the Bible text while allowing free expression of general matters developed by individual writers. Such an open system, focusing on the questions and the suggested answers, would also convey the impression that other possible answers may exist and would stimulate new ideas as much as it taught the content and appreciation of the old. It would make the give and take, the arguments, and the analysis the main concern. Focusing on the answers without the problems turns discussion and analysis into fiat and a system that encourages thoughtful creativity into dogmatic antiquarianism.

Virtually all Bible commentaries and midrashim have been stimulated by one stimulus -- the Bible text -- and a collection of comments from these works that fails to make this the primary focus gives the impression that the words of the sages are of primary importance, not the scriptural passages on which they commented. Appropriate descriptions of the volumes that seemed to be sensitive to this question are those of Rabbi Moses Feinstein, who originally saw the Artscroll production as anthologies of "precious things" collated from the words of the sages. In his early approbations he failed to state that these volumes are actually commentaries or explanations of the Bible, but this has been altered in Volume 6 of Genesis.
On the surface, Artscroll appears to be an anthologized commentary containing excerpts from and paraphrases of traditional writings on the Bible, but this is only partly correct. The sources on which it is based have been reworked, edited, misrepresented and systematically censored to present its own new image of the Bible.\textsuperscript{12} It may fancy itself the voice of the past, the presentation of a "Chazal's eye-view" of the Bible, but only some of the sources are old, while the attitudes imposed on them are late twentieth century East-Euromerican Yeshiva World. One might question how such a revolutionary development has been promoted by writers whose entire effort is allegedly designed to be so conservative, but such are the strengths of Artscroll's unhistorical approach.

We may conclude that the editors are radical innovators without even being aware of it. But it is also possible that through selection of certain models and controlled censorship of others they are consciously working to redirect the way in which traditional Jews understand the Bible.

On Modernity in Bible Study

The past few centuries have witnessed many varied trends in the study of the Bible, but "modern" Bible study is distinguished by several factors. Starting with Spinoza and those with him who form the beginnings of Biblical criticism, we see a growing challenge to the divine authority of the Bible, a serious doubt about God's role in the Bible's formation, and distrust of the Bible's claim to relate what really happened in antiquity. While this skeptical attitude has become the basis of much that passes for modern Biblical scholarship, it is not the primary characteristic of being "modern". Beginning with the discovery of the ancient Near East by Napoleon, learned readers of the Bible have reoriented their approach to the holy text in a conscious effort to see the Biblical characters in the light of their authentic ancient environments rather than as reconstructed in the clothes, habits and ideologies of the ages of the readers themselves.\textsuperscript{13}

To be sure, no amount of archaeological data from cognate civilizations will enable the absolutely certain recovery of the ancient past, and even the availability of original documents directly related to the events in the Bible will not answer all of the possible questions.\textsuperscript{14} But this type of approach, stressing the ancient, original context of the Bible rather than its current homiletic potential, is what distinguishes modern
Biblical study from that of centuries and millenia ago. Approaches that dispute Spinoza's philosophical skepticism would be called religious, as would those that insist on the relevance of the Bible for modern life. Those that totally ignore the study of antiquities are simply not modern. Traditional Jews may feel somewhat threatened by this notion, because rabbinic tradition has based its claim on a vertical pattern of authentic transmission from antiquity to the present, and some pious readers may feel uncomfortable in a horizontal approach that stresses only ancient sources and preferably those close in time and space to the text under discussion. But surely there can be no serious threat to religious belief from the ancient artifacts, texts and buildings that were used by the very people about whom believers so strongly desire to study. To be sure, there is a wide gap between the attitudes of many of the modern scholars who make these materials available to the general public and the religious leaders who ignore them; but it would seem crucial that this material not be ignored and that it be subjected instead to the same rigorous analysis to which the traditional commentators submitted the non-traditional sources available to them. Only in this way can the useful aspects of the data be made available to strengthen the commitment of the faithful on scientifically verifiable grounds wherever possible.

Of course the comparison of these ancient materials (usually documents) with the related parts of the Bible will not necessarily confirm all aspects of the traditional interpretations of the Bible. Their challenges to the authority and accuracy of the Bible are as much a function of the nature of the authority and accuracy assumed to exist as the testimony of the Bible itself, and they do offer possible solutions to exegetical questions that have been answered differently by the commentators over the centuries. Thus the challenge is primarily directed at the commentators, the midrashim, and the philosophers, and, it requires reexamination of the approved writers of previous generations, a process that was routine over the centuries but has gone out of style in certain latter day Orthodox circles. Religious readers need not reject all that has gone before; a serious reading of these materials more than justifies a careful study of many of the treasured commentators right along with the best of the modern writers (and some contemporary critics have come around to this way of thinking). But the process of Biblical interpretation is an ongoing (perhaps never ending) open search. Religious Jews
should rely on the classical, medieval, and modern traditionalists for contributions in the areas of their strengths, but, they might also seek out, examine and assimilate the relevant elements of the scientific contribution of modern times, for avoiding this last step violates a principle hallowed by centuries of earlier Jewish writers. This procedure has not been followed by Artscroll, which avoids all contact with these discoveries.

Modern study also stresses the importance of historical perspective, an attitude accepted by Artscroll. Thus in Eichah, (p. xxxv) the reader is asked "Can someone pretend to understand today's Sephardic Jews without understanding nineteenth century Yemen and Morocco? Or understand Ashkenazi Jews without knowing the Pale of Settlement and Austro-Hungarian Empire?" While the subjects are obviously more complex than these questions might suggest, any exhaustive analysis must include these concerns. Following Artscroll's formulation, I feel compelled to ask two similar questions. "Can someone pretend to understand the Jews of the Bible without understanding ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia? Or can one understand the Israelites who wandered in the desert without understanding the world of ancient Egypt and the Pharaohs?" The unfortunate fact is that virtually all historical perspectives on the ancient, medieval and modern books cited and discussed in the volumes are lacking. The reader is never given any serious historical information that can be used to evaluate the contributions of anyone cited. What point is served by these grand questions? The Artscroll effort has fallen short of its own standards.

Another point of interest in modern Biblical studies, especially important because of the development of literary criticisms of various types, centers in the names of God that appear in the Bible, particularly in the Torah. Frequently modern scholars lose sight of the fact that areas which concern them have bothered intelligent readers of the Bible before, and that alternate solutions have been offered; in this case, the Artscroll selections should go far to dispel this misconception. Throughout the volumes we frequently find careful attention given to the various divine names, including an ongoing attempt to understand exactly what may be deduced from certain unexpected or apparently inconsistent usages. It is difficult to determine if the editors' interest in this subject comes from the desire to collect random earlier comments or to refute one of the essential elements of modern criticism;
there is no hint either at the challenge or at any of the
solutions that modern scholars have offered. In any case, the
authorities excerpted in the commentaries, particularly the
medieval ones, were definitely sensitive to the problem, and in
the Artscroll volumes we find a good but disorganized sample of
the older responses that have been proposed.17

There are other aspects to modern Bible study, but these
typify Bible study only as part of the general field of modern
inquiry. Thus, for instance, no modern scholar would consider
studying any ancient or medieval text from a popular edition, if
a critical one were available. The thousands of variant
readings and citations from published manuscripts and early
writers are invaluable in reconstructing the best possible
versions of the Mishnah, targumim, talmudim, midrashim and
medieval writers, and, again, there are important and extensive
efforts along these lines by Artscroll's religious precursors.
This is another religiously acceptable form of research that
Artscroll has avoided, and by so doing the editors have not only
repudiated one of the most useful sources of precise information
on dozens of important texts; they have also popularized,
perhaps even sanctified, vulgar editions, inaccurate readings,
and errors, all in the desire to be uncritical and
unscientific.18

Torah and Scientia

One of Artscroll's major concerns is the avoidance of
influence from unapproved sources of interpretation. Not
content with simply anthologizing the many traditional
commentaries, Artscroll has evidenced open hostility to all that
it does not accept as valid. This means that this other
material has been considered and rejected.

Occasional references to non-traditional sources point to a
strange inconsistency that must be pressed, but the implications
of this criticism of general knowledge lead to an important
observation. While most (but not all) of the time the Artscroll
series accurately presents the words of the authorities and
sources it cites, through its refusal to utilize materials
beyond those canonized by these sources and to apply these
sources to contemporary issues it has failed to provide
traditional answers for the questions and intellectual
challenges facing the modern reader. The Artscroll response to
the huge number of linguistic, historical and archaeological
discoveries of the past century is to declare them scientific
distortions or, more frequently, to omit them entirely and to
insinuate that others who do not similarly bury their heads in
the sand are apostates of a sort.

To be sure, there is a vast Jewish exegetical literature
that ignores scientific inquiry and intellectualism, but there
is also a huge corpus that does not. Criticism of Artscroll's
narrowness may be derived from careful study of the same
religious writers on whom its editors drew and not from some
external, heretical ideology or even from the Jewish writers
they omitted. Briefly, Maimonides routinely analyzed the pagan
literature for its bearing on understanding the Torah and even
made it the basis of his rationale for the mitzvot; Nachmanides
cited the Apocrypha and an archaeological discovery of his time;
Abarbanel constantly made use of the interpretations and
observations of non-Jewish writers; most of the medieval
philosophers produced works that are syntheses of traditional
Jewish sources and various combinations of Aristotelian and
neo-Platonic philosophies. Menasseh ben Israel's Conciliator
(cited in Bereishis, p. 528) is an excellent example of this
type of blend of Jewish and non-Jewish sources in a commentary;
Rabbi Z. H. Chajes cited and explained the importance of many
ancient texts from the Apocrypha and elsewhere; Rabbi David
Hoffman also utilized these materials constantly in his
exegetical writings. The list could be longer, but the
point is clear. Facts were used from all sources. Artscroll
has not accepted this principle. To be fair, it should be noted
that a small amount of scientific information is found in
Artscroll, but it is rarely quoted firsthand. Thus Aaron
Marcus, the author of Kesset HaSofer, was able to utilize some
archaeological data that he found relevant, and Artscroll may
quote it even if it does not correspond with information made
available from other traditional sources, but no contemporary
archaeologists or their works are ever mentioned. The maps in
Yehoshua, for example, are based on the work of Rabbi J.
Schwarz, who died in 1865. Certain geographical information is
provided to complement the statements of the approved writers,
and astronomy is referred to on occasion, but there is really
very little pure science included in the books and virtually
nothing of the other scholarly disciplines that have been
developed and that might have made important contributions.

The problem of the admission of scientific data into
Orthodox thought has been dealt with at some length by Russell
Jay Hendel. He begins by citing passages from the Talmud,
Maimonides, and elsewhere that openly state that knowledge, including what one might call the physical sciences, is Torah. He then "intuitively" rejects this idea in favor of a definition of Torah that relates to the source of a statement, not its content. This logic, when applied to Bible study, yields the observation:

Rabbis are often confronted with anti-traditional statements coming from Biblical criticism. Intuitively, one would like to classify these statements as heretical. Yet, this seems inconsistent with acceptance or recognition of apparently similar statements among some Rishonim, who made statements differing from the accepted Talmudic opinion.

This dilemma vanishes as soon as we realize that, like Talmud Torah, epikorsus (heresy) is defined by its source, -- not just by its content. The Rishon's antitradiotional statement, [sic] emanates from an ideologically committed person who is attempting to study our tradition by logically analyzing Biblical texts. The epikorus' antitradiotional statement [sic] emanates from an antideologically committed person analyzing Biblical texts. Thus, the Rishon, on both a personal and textual level, relates to a source of kedusha -- hence, his act is one of Talmud Torah. The epikorus, however, relates on a personal level to a source of Toomah (uncleanness) and epikorsus -- hence his act is classified differently.21

Nothing could be clearer. Only the author of a particular idea is important; the content of the idea is all but irrelevant. It is very difficult to correlate this notion with the attitudes of the medieval writers under discussion, but Hendel's statement undoubtedly reflects the thinking of many contemporary Orthodox Jews and, in the absence of any formal statement, appears to be a close approximation of the Artscroll position.

All else aside, the system breaks down when it comes to dealing with errors in the scientific data, an aspect of the problem that Hendel has ignored. As man's knowledge of the world has advanced, many of the scientific claims of earlier epochs have been refuted or replaced by later ones. Thus some of the scientific observations that were incorporated into the authoritative religious literature of earlier centuries need to be brought in line with certain modern perceptions, but their inclusion in these works has given them canonical status, and one is therefore faced with the need to modify their status because of scientific advances. This is perceived as desecration of sacred texts.

The presence of this outside material in the writings of approved authors must mean that its admission was not
prohibited, and some writers insist that it is even necessary. A worthy model for enterprises like Artscroll is Maimonides' methodological note in the introduction to his commentary on Pirqe Avot (Shemonah Peragim), which he saw as a collection of other writers' observations:

"Know that the ideas that I will present in these chapters and in the subsequent commentary are not of my own invention, nor are they explanations that I discovered, but rather I have gleaned them from [a] the words of the sages in the Midrashim, in the Talmud, and in others of their works, also from [b] the words of the philosophers, both ancient and recent and also from [c] the works of many [other] people -- Accept the truth from whoever said it."

Priority was given to the words of the sages, but the teachings of ancient and (for Maimonides) modern philosophers were also included, as were the relevant and correct ideas of many other people. Truth was not the monopoly of philosophy, or of antiquity, or even of rabbinic authority. It was accepted from wherever it came; its source neither precluded nor guaranteed its being truth, and the directive to accept it (Arabic: 'sm, imperative) is unmistakable.22

Artscroll's procedure has failed to carry out this program. The reader is blocked from using the most advanced knowledge available, but he is told that he cannot deal with the halachic problems of megillah readings on Purim that relate to questions of walled cities (The Megillah, pp. 125-6); that a woman who resigns herself to widowhood for ten years to the day loses the ability to bear children (Ruth, p. 75); that the purpose of leaves on plants is to protect the fruit (Tehillim, p. 62); that chiromancy is meaningful (ibid., p. 225); that an increase of light would enable people to see very small objects (Bereishis, p. 40); that the gestation period for a snake is seven years (ibid., p. 128); that man was originally created a duparsophon (double body, male and female) (ibid., p. 167); that the stars can influence human destiny (ibid., pp. 510-511;23 etc., etc. These statements cannot be considered reliable, in as much as they ignore the potential contribution of scientific exploration (e.g. dating walled cities) and include folklore in place of scientific fact (e.g. the gestation period of snakes).

One of the most interesting examples of the misapplication of ancient science centers on the kidneys. In several places Artscroll notes that the kidneys are the seat of the intellect (Bereishis, p. 409, Tehillim, p. 622, etc., based on Rosh HaShanah 26a, etc.). This notion is then utilized to explain
how Abraham managed to observe the Torah before it was given to Moses — his "spiritual kidneys" filtered out the waste of the world and left him with Torah purity. To be sure the basis of this comment is rabbinic (Gen. Rab. 61:1) and Rabbi Gifter, who apparently is the source of the spiritual kidney theory, may have intended it metaphorically. But how can a modern reader be expected to accept either the rabbi's claim about kidneys or the assumption underlying the application of the claim to Abraham's observance of the mitzvot?

All of these observations are quoted from authoritative writers; the reader is expected to believe them. The editors have anticipated to some degree that some Orthodox readers may not accept all of these unscientific statements, for in some places where the literal meanings of rabbinic statements contradict what science has proved to be true, the texts are explained metaphorically. The effect is to hold that because earlier writers tried to explain the Bible in the light of the science of their days, contemporary Orthodox readers are bound, if not literally then in some metaphoric way, by their errors, and they must accept ideas that were not at all what the original writers intended. It would be valuable if future Artscroll writers consider more carefully the words of the Taz (Divrei David, Gen 2:23): "We should not divest the words of our rabbis of their simple meanings."

The value of using scientific determination in religious matters has been strongly supported by Rabbi M. D. Tendler in his reply to Rabbi A. Soloveitchik's criticism of his position on the halachic status of brain death:

"The interface of ethics or religion and medical practice is a treacherous area because it demands dual expertise to traverse it safely. In the issue at hand, a mastery of the fundamentals of physiology is necessary for the proper elucidation of the talmudic references."24

Clearly Tendler believes that the correct understanding of the passage, in this case based on the ability to differentiate between the two possible meanings of a text, may be had only with the benefit of scientific training. A similar dual expertise must be demanded in Biblical interpretation and in the reading of secondary sources that would explain the Bible, but under most circumstances textual interpretation is part of the Humanities, not the Sciences, and this is a much more touchy business.
Torah (Orthodox teachings) and Science, originally thought to be incompatible, have become united by limiting Science to technology and leaving speculation, interpretation or value judgments to Torah. This united front of the two supposedly invincible disciplines, Torah and Science, now confronts the Humanities as subjective, ephemeral, human distortion. Anyone who attempts a response to a particular problem using the methods or values of the Humanities is, by Artscroll's definition, operating outside the Orthodox camp; in Artscroll's words he is "a secular humanist." What is so seriously missed in this position is the realization that religious thought as it developed over the centuries, also included what we would now designate as aspects of the Humanities, though the fields of late seem to have parted company. The conflict of Torah and Science against the Humanities is thus the result of Science's generally acknowledged resistance to this sphere of thought and Orthodoxy's facile rejection of it for being anti-Torah and not even scientific. Actually Torah and the Humanities have much in common (perhaps a source of the tension between them) and much to learn from each other. They would profit greatly from a closer relationship, even if Science were to become a little jealous.

Above I described an Orthodox attitude towards Science that values but limits scientific elucidation. Such an attitude is typical of the publications of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, where one sees highly educated, even decorated scientists blending (what appear to be) sophisticated scientific arguments with religious thought. Totally lacking in many of their presentations is a comparative level of sophistication in treating the Judaic elements of their work. The blend is incongruous, but obviously works for many educated people. Orthodox thinkers might consider adding to the proposed treatment of a given problem the perspectives available from other intellectual disciplines. The opportunity to employ the Humanities could afford the insights of history, linguistics, geography, comparative literature, philosophy, etc., all of which have counterparts in the extant religious literature. The challenges presented by these and other academic disciplines may also prove valuable and stimulate new attempts at Orthodox interpretation of the Bible. Should this happen, the advantage of hindsight would be present, in that previous attempts at religious appropriations of the academic disciplines would be available for scrutiny. The penalty for intellectual
failure would be greater, though, as would be the criticism of "borrowing," which is almost inevitable in some areas.

It hardly needs to be stated that neither of the positions just outlined has been followed by Artscroll. The Humanities are shunned and Science is basically ignored, leaving Torah to be studied by itself, as if that were really possible. The doctrine that the only proper sources to be used in the elucidation of the Torah are Torah-sources is clearly enunciated in Rabbi Gifter's Hebrew forward to Bereishis I. This brief document deserves to be translated into English for those readers who are unable to read the Hebrew, but for now I must excerpt several statements. Most interesting is the principle that "God's Torah may be explained only in the light of Torah." This idea dovetails with the Rabbi's statements that the Oral Torah embodies the only proper explanations of the written Torah, that no non-Jewish efforts to understand the Torah are acceptable, and that any deviation from the Oral Torah in the explanation of the Written Torah is heresy, even in the narrative portions that contain no obvious references to halachic practice. This elimination of all options in the analysis of Biblical narrative and poetry (even non-halachic passages) is very radical, particularly when compared with the many traditional commentators who did not accept this position, but what is most striking is its similarity to the teachings of a 17th century philosopher who, in his desire to free Biblical interpretation from the clutches of subjective rabbinic distortion, stated "our knowledge of scripture must then be looked for in scripture only."27

The difference between the attitudes of Rabbi Gifter and Spinoza is at the same time very great and very slight. Spinoza limited scripture to scripture, while for Rabbi Gifter scripture is "Torah" in general, but both men limit the terms of reference to the closed corpus under discussion. Spinoza, of course, added certain claims for the ability to use reason as a tool of exegesis; Rabbi Gifter has not addressed himself to this particular question. It is difficult to know the extent to which he is prepared to trust human reason, but he presumably does so not at all when it comes into conflict with anything considered Torah. The fact that he has declared any deviation from the Oral Torah to be heresy may not be surprising, but some attempt should have been made to correlate this position with those of the earlier, more flexible rabbinic authorities. I suggest that Spinoza did not emphasize the value of archaeology
because he lived before the advent of the archaeological age and did not fathom the role that modern discovery might take in illucidating the Bible.\textsuperscript{28} Rabbi Gifter, while he would appropriately reject Spiniza's religious skepticism, also has no use for discoveries. His approach therefore lacks both of the characteristics of modernity, and we must conclude that while Spinoza's position is partly modern, Rabbi Gifter's is premodern! Given the sanctity attributed to Jewish tradition and the general hostility of the modern world to religion, it should be obvious that nothing insulting is intended by this observation. But, if this attitude really reflects a premodern unawareness of recent discoveries and the ability of these discoveries to advance the cause of true, accurate, Torah-, Orthodox (or whatever term one may wish to use to describe) Bible study, can it really serve to convince, much less to guide, twentieth century people? One who accepts this approach is fenced in from both sides. On the one hand, he is unable to deviate from anything handed down in the tradition; on the other hand, he is barred from taking seriously anything else that may seem of value in treating a problem. If ever there was a doctrine that justified Toynbee's claim that Judaism is a fossil, this is it.

The "Torah Version of History"

A Passage in The Megillah (p. xx) states: "Most of us have become indoctrinated with a non-Jewish, anti-Torah version of history." It is hardly worth debating how the writer knows this, but one might justifiably assume that Artscroll believes itself to be the correct, Torah-version of history. No formal definition is presented, though, and we must deduce for ourselves exactly what is meant.

Artscroll works on the assumption that all narratives in Torah-sources report events that actually occurred. This is not the place to enter into the debate on allegorical interpretation of the Bible or the difference of opinion between Maimonides and Nachmanides on the historicity of many of the narratives in the Torah, but one must note that the approved literature does allow for the possibility that some of these stories are not historical events.\textsuperscript{29} This also seems to be the principle underlying the following passage from the Zohar:
Rabbi Simeon said, "Woe to the person who says that the Torah's purpose is simply to teach stories and the words of commoners. For if that were the case, even today we could produce a Torah from the words of commoners, even better than the others... Rather all the words of the Torah are the real matters and lofty secrets..." (Vol. III, 152a).

Similarly, rabbinic literature is replete with discussions about the historical value of many Talmudic and midrashic passages. Responses to unbelievable stories ranged from dogmatic acceptance to forceful rejection. A middle position called for reinterpretation of the passages, thereby avoiding both the problems and the need to reject the texts. Obviously some traditional writers realized that the purpose of rabbinic midrashim need not be the presentation of an accurate description of past events; others disagreed. If these writings were not intended to be historical, then it is inappropriate to treat them as such on the assumption that it would be unfaithful to do otherwise. It may not have been easy, but traditional commentators over the years have worked with midrashic literature as a form of Biblical exegesis that demonstrates great sensitivity to the text, preserves essential aspects of ancient law and lore, and contains important sources of religious teachings, without assuming that all of it is historical.

The implications of such an approach are extremely pervasive and require re-evaluation of popularly accepted views of such matters as: patriarchal observance of the mitzvot and rabbinic legislation; the doctrine that the Torah existed before the creation of the world; the accuracy of the rabbinic images of Biblical figures; the claim that the entire Torah (the Pentateuchal text) was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai; the letter-perfect accuracy of the Biblical text, including the Torah; and the assumption that all Biblical (or even talmudic and post-talmudic) books reflect one unified approach on any and all subjects. Some traditional writers were committed to the more controversial (and now unorthodox) positions on these and similar issues; they are not new, critical, or scientific corruptions that have no place in authentic religious literature. Lengthy lists of sources on these and many other similar problems may be culled from the same approved writers whose teachings fill the Artscroll pages. Selective disregard of these problems by Orthodox writers has placed many people in the position of not recognizing what is a traditional religious posture and what is not. Serious treatment of these issues as an ongoing part of Orthodox intellectual interests can only
serve to strengthen the commitment of the uncommitted, one of the avowed purposes of the Artscroll effort.

To a large extent the problems of reconstructing Biblical history depend on the careful reading of many narrative passages, and these are the texts that have been subjected to the most midrashic manipulation. Thus, if one is to probe Biblical history, he must first peel off the layers of midrashic analysis and get down to the bare text. Artscroll need not reject all midrashim, but it should focus on their purposes. Some midrashim were composed to teach moral lessons, others for halachic reasons; some represent important theological and philosophical statements, others were intended as jokes. The assignments to categories are sure to meet with less than unanimous support, but the attempt should be made. Of course the real conflict arises when a midrash appears to have been written with historical intentions but really is not accurate. Nonetheless, the general attitude of many early writers was flexible, and one need only turn to the statements of Hai Gaon, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nachmanides and many others to see that acceptance or rejection was very subjective. Note, for example, the words of Shemuel HaNaggid:

"You should know that everything the sages of blessed memory established as halachah in matter of mitzvah, which is from Moses Our Teacher, peace unto him, which he received from God, one should not add to it or detract from it. But what they explained with regard to Biblical verses, each did according to what occurred to him and what he thought. We learn those of these explanations that make sense, but we don't rely on the rest . . . "

This feeling is not limited to medieval authorities, or to Sephardic intellectuals, as may be seen, for example, from the writings of the nineteenth century figure Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes. In contrast, a non-judgmental attitude toward midrash is reflected in various contemporary writers. Thus, the Hazon Ish: "And I return to the simple belief in the Oral Torah and I don't engage in arguing 'why'; my only desire is to be like a simple Jew who relates 'what' he received." And Rabbi Ahron Kotler: "No part of Torah [halachah, aggadah, dinim and stories (his words)] can be properly assessed by man using only his limited faculties." This highly midrashic posture is not new. It dominated Biblical interpretation in ancient times and exerted a tremendous influence in some medieval circles, but the early midrashic approach was replaced, suppressed and/or manipulated by many medieval writers, so that they could use the midrashic material they wanted and bypass the
rest. With the rise of the mystical influence, particularly strong in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, rationalism was replaced by another midrashic approach that frequently absorbed and strengthened the early attitudes that had been circumvented previously.35 Following this period, the Jewish community lost its more unified attitude on this matter, and different groups favored approaches that could be called mystical, talmudic, scientific, midrashic and rational as well as various mixtures of them. Each group, in turn, claimed authoritative sources for its approach, and, because of vacillations that had occurred over the centuries, each really could justify itself within the overall traditional Jewish world. Further external stimuli such as the Enlightenment, the development of Reform Judaism, and the advance of scientific discovery also helped shape the various Orthodox hermeneutics, all drawing from a common pool of writers, but each contributing its own elements and producing a literature different from the others.

Whether motivated by the rejection of Reform, acceptance of certain mystical teachings (particularly when supported by earlier rabbinic doctrine), the generally perplexed nature of belief in today's world, or some combination of these and other factors, Artscroll has followed a model of interpretation that accepts midrash as historical. While many midrashic passages could, in theory, be discussed as part of the traditional, multi-layered exegesis, and occasionally they actually are, the impression given the reader is that the primary level of interpretation is, in fact, the midrashic one.

Traditional Jewish hermeneutics offer a commentator the choice to accept or not accept midrash as history. Since the Artscroll approach sees midrash as primarily historical, and since it presents this view as correct and binding, a serious conflict is generated with other sources of historical information that contradict certain midrashic statements. If the midrashim must be taken as presented, then the faithful must believe: that David knew of Homer (Tehillim, p. 251); that the King of Nineveh at the time of Jonah was the Pharaoh of the exodus (Yonah, p. 124); that because no wars were mentioned before Genesis 14, there were, in fact, none (Bereishis, p. 473); that Abraham, Joshua, David and Mordechai were the only men whose coinage was accepted throughout the world (ibid., p. 429); that Ishmael married women named Adisha and Fatima (ibid., pp. 767-8); etc. Artscroll's presentation of late Biblical history also follows rabbinic teachings and dates the
destruction of the first Temple in 423 B.C.E., the building of the second Temple in 353 B.C.E., etc.

Various precedents would have allowed Artscroll to avoid literal acceptance of midrash had it wanted to do so, but the contemporary Orthodox world is highly receptive to unhistorical approaches and uncritical thinking. That it prefers believing in lore of the ancients -- who were unhistorical and uncritical -- to confronting modern issues is somewhat understandable. But its rejection of those classical writers who already fought these battles means that contemporary Orthodoxy, to the extent it supports Artscroll, is very much a product of the mystical and folklorist mindset that was revived in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries under Kabbalistic influence after having been seriously weakened by the medieval rationalists (whose piety and acceptability, ironically enough, the contemporary Orthodox world continues to acknowledge, at least in theory).

Many of the Artscroll volumes have their sitz im leben in pious liturgical contexts rather than literary, historical or text-analytical ones. The fact that the Torah, Psalms and the megillot were chosen to inaugurate the project is also significant. Unlike the Israeli, scholarly-traditional series of commentaries DaCat Migra', which has yet to publish a volume on the Torah, Artscroll has accepted this challenge almost from the outset. Strong precedents for interpreting the Torah are of great help in this endeavour, but perhaps another dimension of exegetical and ideological influence is being expressed. In describing mystical interpretation of the Bible, Scholem observes: "A large part of the enormous Kabbalistic literature consists of commentaries on Books of the Bible, especially the Pentateuch, the Five Scrolls, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, the Book of Ruth, and Ecclesiastes." The list is redundant, but with the exception of Jonah, which was published for use on Yom Kippur, the first Artscroll volumes in print correspond to those in Scholem's list. One might see the similarity as coincidence -- liturgical interest being the factor that motivated the Kabbalistic writers also -- but another possibility presents itself, namely that Artscroll shares this same interest in mystical matters or at least receives a significant stimulus from the twentieth century residue of this earlier mystical activity. The choice of Daniel and Ezekiel (also of mystical importance) to follow in the series bears this out, as do Artscroll's Zoharic attitude on Biblical history and frequent references to Hasidic ethics and philosophy. The ready
acceptance of the Artscroll enterprise by the contemporary Orthodox world may be seen as evidence for the fact that such mystical values or notions have survived and/or been revived in this American Jewish community. Whether this is true for other aspects of Jewish life is worthy of study; a positive response is very possible. I believe this influence is unquestionably a factor in the way this group of Jews studies, teaches, and preaches about the Bible.

Conclusion

Lack of space prevents an exhaustive comparison of Artscroll's procedures with those of its rabbinic predecessors, but a number of points are clear. There are traditional writers who favored the use of non-Jewish or non-traditional sources in Biblical interpretation and others who opposed the idea. Artscroll has followed the latter. Some traditional writers did open battle with their rabbinic predecessors; Artscroll imitates those who prefer to ignore the traditionalists they reject, but it openly rejects non-traditionalists. Rabbinic writers were divided on the use of science, on the obligation to follow midrashic exegesis, on the rationalization of Biblical miracles, and on the need to accept the narratives in religious sources as historical. In each case Artscroll has sided with the less rational, more naively faithful groups.

Many writers stressed how the problems in the Bible text stimulated their responses. Artscroll imitates those who did not, preferring to present the disputed results of serious enquiries as fact. It has ignored most of the literary considerations of the earlier writers in favor of midrashic analysis. It gives lip service to historical perspective but eschews any serious use of it. It prefers vulgar editions of religious texts to critical ones and gives the impression of being totally uninvolved in contemporary intellectual or scholarly matters, even though there are rabbinic predecessors acceptable within Orthodoxy who encouraged both.

Many of these attitudes are probably accepted by most contemporary Orthodox Jewry. The interplay of European, Israeli, American, scientific, Zionist, religious, secularist, reformist and nationalist elements in today's Jewish world is fascinating to observe but potentially dangerous to certain religious interests, and the Artscroll position on this interplay is clear and strong, though I expect that not all equally committed readers will be able to identify with the fears it
seems to express. There are some very positive modern
ccontributions to the understanding of the Bible, and the
acknowledgment of these contributions can only enhance several
millenia of serious Biblical interpretation and simultaneously
add to the credibility of one’s rejection of those other
elements of modernity that really are useless or even hostile.

In searching rabbinic literature for a school of exegesis
that parallels Artscroll or served as its model, we may rule out
some groups immediately. The philosophical works of Maimonides
and his followers may be dropped from consideration, as may the
Spanish exegetes (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel), the massoretes, the
North-African philologists (e.g. Ibn Janach) and the modern
religious intellectuals (e.g. Rabbis Z. H. Chajes, David
Hoffman, A. Kook). The French school of Rashi and the Tosafists
is somewhat closer, but the peshat tendencies of Rashbam and
Bechor Shor are far from Artscroll’s real focus. Hasidic
writers have had a strong impact on the work, as have other
glossators (in contrast to commentators) of the past few
centuries. Talmudic and midrashic teachings are felt
throughout, but as interpreted through these same limited
perspectives.

Ironically, almost all of these writers are cited, some
quite frequently, but their impacts have been felt only
slightly. In fact very few of the real influences on
Artscroll's attitudes come from the classical Jewish Bible
commentators. Most derive from homileticists, midrashists,
glossators and others who used the Bible as the medium for
spreading their religious teachings but were less than engaged
by its literary qualities, problems related to its historicity,
or other open intellectual concerns traditionally associated
with Bible study. Rabbi Ahron Kotler's pamphlet How to Teach
Torah is a good example of an American antecedent to Artscroll,
though it, too, has roots in certain East-European circles of
thought.

Except for its inconsistent usage of certain non-traditional
sources and its huge number of factual mistakes, Artscroll's
legitimacy as an expression of certain forms of Jewish
interpretation is certain. It remains to examine why this
particular presentation of the Bible has received such support
from so many segments of the Orthodox community. A major factor
in this acceptance is appearance. A quick look at the volumes
will more than justify the unwary purchaser’s expense. The
books are attractively laid out, nicely printed, well bound, and
aesthetically jacketed. They definitely look good. In addition, most of the volumes proudly display letters from highly respected yeshiva leaders. While the letters contain little evidence of actual contact with the books, the impression they create is one of strong endorsement. Should anyone look further, the layout -- with tables of contents, bibliographies and footnotes -- will give the impression of carefully documented research. Why should anyone question their value?

A second reason the books have received such acceptance is their similarity to the kinds of exposure to the Bible Orthodox Jews receive. Synagogues and yeshivot rarely teach Biblical books seriatim. The Torah is often studied weekly, but most in-depth treatment of its contents comes in classes where the primary focus is the Talmud or in brief homiletical presentations. And many parts of the Bible are all but unknown. Serious study of the classical commentators is rarely pursued, and people generally prefer a homiletical bonmot to serious grappling with the text. Artscroll thus appeals to many minimally educated readers as a continuation of the superficial exposure to the Bible they receive in yeshivot and synagogues and may actually raise their levels of knowledge and awareness of certain texts and issues. But the series is not aimed at only the unlettered, and a number of writers have bemoaned the use of Artscroll as a school text, for without proper attention to original works in Hebrew, the next generation of Orthodox Jews may grow up unable to read the very books that served as the basis of Artscroll's collection.

This is, I believe, very far from the intentions of the Artscroll editors, who constantly encourage the return to the rabbinic sources they used. A loss of ability to study Talmud, midrash and other rabbinic writings would be saddening to them and defeat one of their purposes. It would also leave the next generation of readers limited to studying Artscroll (and translations of the classics currently in progress). This would create a one-dimensional, homiletical approach to the Bible and prevent people from being seriously involved in the issues of Biblical study. Students and adults would be limited in their abilities to handle the originals. They would miss the dialectics, the problems, and the discussions and be forced to accept (or reject) only the teachings presented.

As far as this may be from Artscroll's intention, the project may well contribute to this eventuality. American Orthodoxy's increasingly monochromatic image is frequently
criticized. The community is being pressed closer and closer together. Homogeneity of practice and -- more significantly -- of thought are being forced upon the Orthodox world as never before. Independent halachic decisions are becoming less common as major problems are resolved through consultation with fewer authorities, while Orthodox schools and synagogues seem to orient their teachings and through them their followers to an ever narrowing spectrum of ideas. It was once fashionable to discuss whether traditional Judaism should be called orthodoxy or orthopraxy; the former term is now more appropriate. While commitment to observance is increasing in some circles (and decreasing in others), doctrine has become more important than it was, in some circles more important than observance; indeed, observance without total acceptance of the contemporary version of the rabbinic myth is considered inadequate, and Artscroll's presentation of answers without questions and debate reinforces the impression that this is correct.

Perhaps this myth was always important, but if so, its acceptable form has changed in recent years, and the hybrid of traditional religiosity and guarded intellectualism fostered by moderate Orthodox leaders and institutions several decades ago has given way to an Orthodoxy that is more insulated, less intellectual and more extreme in its teachings. Its models of piety are more Hasidic, less philosophically sophisticated and less tolerant of heterodoxy than those of earlier years. It is talmudically and midrashically oriented -- with all the positive connotations this carries -- but it is also not really concerned with the Bible.

This dominance of Orthodox education by rabbinic studies is normal and to be expected, but the cumulative impact of years of dealing almost exclusively with rabbinic texts and the lack of concentrated, serious Bible study have taken their toll. The number of factual (not ideological) errors in the Artscroll project is overwhelming. Perfection is hardly a prerequisite for publication, but the kinds of errors point to a serious lack of high quality work in the area of traditional Bible study. The rabbis who work on the project are working hard, but they appear to lack the formal, disciplined training required for the job; so do some rabbis who correct, edit and support the project. The Orthodox community has thus come full cycle in creating, supporting and perpetuating its own form of Biblical interpretation, and it looks like it will be quite a while before this orientation changes. Those who are trained to do
the job lie outside Artscroll's Orthodox world, and there seems to be little desire to master the academic fields of Biblical studies, Jewish philosophy, history, and Semitic languages and literatures, or to trust people who have done so and who take these things seriously.

This situation also helps explain why the Orthodox leadership has backed a project that claims to present only traditional teachings, ostensibly adding nothing new on its own. American Orthodoxy, like its traditional predecessors of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, finds itself unable to confront the contemporary intellectual issues inherent in Bible study. Rapid changes in scholarly positions, a constant secular pressure to erode commitment to traditional values and beliefs, and an almost debilitating fear of modern ideas are all forcing a return to classical sources and even a distrust of these sources when they sound too modern. There were centuries when writing supercommentaries on Rashi and Ibn Ezra took precedence over explication of the Bible, partly because the attitudes and techniques needed for proper Biblical studies were perceived as foreign and hostile, and possibly because critical thinking pushed the results of Biblical interpretation beyond the limits deemed acceptable by the religious community. Whatever the reason, we again find an observant community similarly limited in its scope and circling back on its traditional sources, not moving ahead.

While Artscroll's attitudes obviously reflect the needs and aspirations of many Orthodox Jews, other forms of religious expression stand in marked contrast to them, most notably the Da'at Migra' series of Bible commentaries being published by Mossad HaRav Kook. This Israeli press -- under Orthodox direction, to be sure -- has to its credit an important (but unfinished) series on the Bible that tries to present the best of tradition and scholarship together. Apparently some forms of Israeli Orthodoxy (perhaps because of Sephardic influence) are more interested than their (Ashkenazi) American counterparts in the values, not only the interpretations, of their more intellectually open predecessors.

Perhaps this more sheltered North American stance may help prevent assimilation -- intellectual if not social -- (or at least it gives this impression), but it is not clear for how long. Nor can I estimate the cost. One thing does seem certain. Only when the pendulum swings back and the system again opens up to the intellectual world -- showing the riches
of its heritage and exploring those of others -- will American Orthodox Biblical interpretation be redirected towards its more intellectual rabbinic predecessors.