



## 5 ways

to ponder the biblical text

Two details of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation are demonstrated in our discussion overleaf: 1) the interpretation of an 'absence' in the text, and 2) the free association of diverse passages in the bible. Below, recall these and other 'clues' or 'irritations' in our text (Deut.32) which call for attention:

**1. Absence.** In retelling the story of God and Israel in Deut. 32:1-14 we might have expected the exodus event to loom large, yet its absence led us to ponder the 'wilderness' theme with fruitful result (overleaf).

**2. Association with other passages.** "[God] found them in a desert region" (Deut. 32:10). The *Sifrei* (a rabbinic commentary) interprets this verse through the lens of the prophet Hosea: "I found Israel as grapes in the wilderness" (9:10). Grapes are a precious find in the desert, and so is Israel precious and refreshing to God.

**3. Interesting words/phrases.** The reference to being 'found' in the desert opens up further reflections... Who else is 'found' in the wilderness? E.g., think of Hagar (Genesis 16:7), John the Baptist (Mk 1:1-5) and Jesus himself who is 'found' in a deserted place (Lk 4:42).

**4. Repetition.** "Moses...recited *all the words* of this poem in the hearing of the people" (32.44). The phrase 'all the words' is further repeated in vv. 45-46.

**5. Names.** What interpretative light is shed by the names of people (e.g., Jacob v.9) and places (e.g., Sodom v.32) mentioned in this text?

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

From Yom Kippur (the end of the High Holy Days) to the festival of Sukkot ('festival of booths'), the liturgical rhythm of the Jewish calendar moves from a sombre, introspective mood with themes of repentance and judgment to one of joy, thanksgiving and celebration.

As Jewish communities make their way through this part of their liturgical cycle, Christians can draw inspiration from their journey, especially by reflecting on the biblical texts of this period which are also part of our Christian bible.

Christianity has deep links with Judaism—historically, biblically, spiritually. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

*"The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion."* [Synagogue of Rome, 1986]

We can give expression to this religious 'kinship' by being aware and supportive of the festivals celebrated by our Jewish friends, neighbors and colleagues.



Deuteronomy 32:1-52

Ha'azinu:  
'give ear'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Deuteronomy 32:1-52

Most of our Torah portion is taken up with 'the Song of Moses.'

The author places on the lips of Moses a recollection by God of the troubled relationship between God and Israel. It begins by remembering an idyllic time when Israel was 'the pupil of God's eye,' but by verse 15 the sins of Israel are laid bare and God's fury is unleashed. From verse 26, God reconsiders punishment as a solution and resolves to deliver Israel from its enemies.

Our focus here is the first 14 verses. Read these and then let's take up an 'absence' in the text which caught the attention of the sages...

## Tasting Torah

*"[God] found them in a desert region,  
In an empty howling waste.  
[God] engirded them, watched over them,  
Guarded them as the pupil of God's eye.  
Like an eagle who rouses its nestlings,  
Gliding down to its young..."* (Deut. 32:10-11).

Our Torah passage is remembering the divine kindnesses bestowed by God on the Israelites in the story of their developing relationship. But, asks Abravanel,<sup>1</sup> "What was the reason that Moses did not mention here the departure from Egypt which was the first kindness...prior to their entering the wilderness? How could he say that God found them in the wilderness when God really had found them in Egypt?" Why is the exodus event absent? Ponder this with a Torah discussion partner in *havrutah*.

## Touching Torah

Anticipating such a question, Rashi<sup>2</sup> sees the wilderness emphasis as showing forth Israel's faithfulness to God. He associates this passage with the words found in the prophetic utterance of Jeremiah where the Lord remembers with pleasure Israel's fidelity:

*'The devotion of your youth,  
Your love as a bride—  
How you followed me in the wilderness'* (2:2).

Says Rashi, it was in the desert that the Israelites "accepted upon themselves God's Torah and kingship...They were drawn by faith..."

## Depthing Torah

But does this approach really answer Abravanel's question? After all, Israel exhibited a great deal of rebellion in the wilderness and our Torah portion reproves Israel for its waywardness. Can we suggest another reason why Moses begins his Song not with the exodus from Egypt but with the wilderness experience?

An alternative view from Leibowitz<sup>3</sup> reminds us to think about the audience Moses is addressing. They are not the generation that left Egypt but rather the next generation that was raised in the desert. Perhaps, then, Moses is speaking to the experience closest to the hearts of his listeners. Then again, continues Leibowitz, a stronger explanation can be found by pondering the real purpose of the exodus... It was not simply to remove the people from the slavery of Egypt but to lead them somewhere positively extraordinary: to be a nation who is given the Torah, God's 'teaching,' thus entering into covenant with God... and this sublime vocational calling takes place *in the wilderness*, at Mt Sinai.

## Doing Torah

How does the above discussion contribute to your appreciation of the wilderness/desert as an image and theme encountered frequently in the bible? Where did you find yourself in agreement/disagreement with our selection of Torah commentators? What further insights emerged from your Torah reading?



## Faith & Life

*"You have seen...how I bore you  
on eagles wings and brought you  
to Me"* (Exodus 19:4, before the giving of the Torah).

*"Like an eagle who rouses its  
nestlings..."* (Deuteronomy 32:11).

The image of a parent eagle teaching its young to fly illustrates the action of God who prepares Israel to receive the gift of Torah and thus to grow into a life of covenant, of living as a holy nation, as God's own treasured people.

**Reflect** on this image, and how it speaks to the way the Lord continues to call and teach you.

1. Isaac Abravanel: 1437-1508
  2. Rashi: Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki 1040-1105
  3. Nehama Leibowitz: 1905-1997
- Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Vermont, 2000); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); *The Torah: with Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: JPS.