YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

**By Dr. Avigail Rock**

**Lecture #30:**

**Cassuto**

**A. Introduction**

Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto (1883-1951) was an Italian biblical commentator, historian and researcher of the Ancient Near East and Semitic languages.

Cassuto studied at the University of Florence, and in 1922 he became the rabbi and dean of the *beit midrash* in the city. In 1925, he left this position to become a professor of Hebrew language and literature at the University of Florence, a position he held for eight years.

In 1933, he moved from the University of Florence to the University of Rome. While he was a professor there, he made many contributions, the most significant of which was the cataloguing of Jewish manuscripts in the Vatican Library. In 1938, the passage of the Italian racial laws forces him out of his position. In 1939, he was invited to emigrate to Palestine by Hebrew University, which appointed him as professor of Bible. He served in this capacity until 1951.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In 1944, Hebrew University decided to publish an edition of the *Tanakh* that would reflect the Masoretic text. In order to establish a more precise version, Hebrew University sent Cassuto from Jerusalem to the Jewish community in Aleppo, Syria, in order to analyze the Aleppo Codex (*Keter Aram Tzova)*. The community leaders would not permit Cassuto to photograph the centuries-old manuscript, buy they allowed him to examine it and record his findings; for five days, Cassuto did precisely that. This project later proved to be invaluable, as Cassuto’s notes were the only trace left of much of the Codex, as many pages of it were destroyed during the riots in Aleppo in 1947. Most of these missing sections were from the Torah and from the latter books of *Ketuvim*; a list of important Masoretic notes, which were included at the beginning of the Codex, were also lost. Nevertheless, thanks to Cassuto’s efforts, we still have much of this important data.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is hard to overstate Cassuto’s contributions to Jewish studies in general and biblical studies in particular. *Inter alia,* they include: dozens of papers written in his youth researching the history of Italian Jewry, considered outstanding in the field; writing entries for both the German *Encyclopaedia Judaica* and the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*; serving as chief editor of the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* for two years;[[3]](#footnote-3) and, of course, writing books and commentaries on *Tanakh*. While it was Cassuto’s dream to write a comprehensive commentary on the Torah in its entirety, he only completed a small part of it, on a section of *Bereishit*[[4]](#footnote-4) and on *Shemot* alone.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Cassuto passed away in Jerusalem on 19 Kislev, 5712, at age sixty-eight.

**B. Characteristics of the Commentary**

**Scientific *Peshat*-Based Commentary**

Cassuto explains the verses solely according to *peshat*, the simple meaning of the verse, utilizing the tools of academic study. In his introduction to his commentary on *Bereishit*, Cassuto explains *peshat* in the following way:

This commentary aims to explain the simple meaning of the verse according to the philological-historical method, approaching — as much as possible — understanding the words of the Torah as the Torah would want them to be understood by its readers at the time that it was written.

In other words, in Cassuto’s view, *peshat* is not what we understand the verses to mean; rather, it is what the Giver of the Torah would want the generation which received the Torah to understand. Thus, understanding the cultural milieu of the generation of the Exodus is a prerequisite. We must point out that although Cassuto does not believe in the Torah’s coming from Heaven,[[6]](#footnote-6) he still rejects the documentary hypothesis and explains *Tanakh* as one harmonious unit.

**Scientific Research Based on Ancient Near Eastern Sources**

Cassuto assumes, as mentioned above, that the only way to understand *peshat* is by studying the era in which the Torah was written, as regards all of its facets: cultural, literary, historical, et cetera. Thus, Cassuto’s central assumption is that in order to understand *Tanakh*, the commentator must be well-versed in the culture of the era in which the Torah was written and understand it thoroughly. Consequently, studying the culture of the Ancient Near East is mandatory before attempting to understand *Tanakh*; without familiarity with this material, one cannot hope to understand the text or its message.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Cassuto is one of the first biblical commentators to see the exigency of using archeological findings and ancient Semitic languages to understand the verses. His own research into Ugaritic contributes significantly to his understanding of the biblical lexicon and style. Cassuto spent many years researching the Ancient Near East, and he employs his expansive knowledge to analyze and illuminate many biblical passages. Cassuto writes about the uniqueness of his exegetical approach and the importance of using the study of the Ancient Near East in his introduction to his commentary on *Shemot*:

Contemporary biblical commentators do not sufficiently use what we know now about the literature and culture of the nations neighboring Israel. I, on the other hand, have strived in my commentary to pay attention to the literary creations of these peoples, as well as everything that archeological research into their culture may reveal to us, as it is impossible to understand the verses accurately without constant comparison to the environment in which the Israelites lived and worked, in which all the books of *Tanakh* were produced.

Additionally, Cassuto believes that, as important as it may be to understand the biblical era through archeological findings, it is just as imperative to acknowledge the points of contrast between the viewpoint of *Tanakh* and the viewpoint of the literary creations of other peoples. This is what he writes in his introduction to *Bereishit*.

Not only have I considered the parallels between Israel and other people, but I have also noted the differenced between them. These differences are in fact quite instructive, perhaps even more so than the parallels.

Thus, both in comparison and in contrast, Cassuto explains the *peshat* of the text. We may find many examples of his application of this principle in his commentary on the Torah in general and his commentary on the story of Creation in particular. Let us take, for instance, *Bereishit* 1:21, “God created the great sea-monsters (*tanninim*)…” Cassuto notes that of all the creatures in the narrative, only the *tanninim* are referred to by name.

Throughout this passage, only general categories of plants and animals are referred to, not individual species — except for the *tanninim*. This deviation from the standard cannot exist without specific intent. It appears that here as well, the Torah means to express something along the lines of a protest against those perspectives which were then common among the nations of the world… In Egypt, in Mesopotamia, in the land of Canaan, and in all the lands of the East in general, they were accustomed to tell all types of legends about battles waged by the most powerful gods against *tanninim* and the monsters of their ilk…

In Israel, this tradition about the *tanninim* and their ilk was shaped in a way consistent with the spirit of Israel. No longer would divine powers contend with a supreme god… Instead, it voices its protest with a tranquil tone. Thus, it tells us, “God created the great sea-monsters.” This is equivalent to saying: far be it from us to think that these *tanninim* were mythological creatures opposing God or rebelling against Him; no they were, natural beings…

The Ancient Near East is full of legends about the *tannin*, a god in its own right, which challenges the supreme god; therefore, in Cassuto’s view, the Torah opposes this view[[8]](#footnote-8) and instead tells us of the creation of the *tanninim*, stressing that the *tannin* is a creation of God, not a god in its own right. [[9]](#footnote-9) This explanation allows us to understand why the *tanninim* receive special attention in the story of Creation, as well as various biblical verses which mention the *tannin*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another example of the contrast between Canaanite literature and the Torah of Israel is in the laws of *Parashat Mishpatim*. In his introduction to it, Cassuto writes the following:

It is self-evident that in order to understand and evaluate these legal sections, it is appropriate to compare them to collections of laws from the Ancient Near East which have recently been found… We should not view the passages in the Torah as a legal codex… but rather as instructions regarding certain topics. This explains why the Torah does not deal with certain topics which are the essence of civil law, e.g. the laws of marriage…

In other words, the Jewish people at the time of the Exodus, just like all other contemporary nations, has its collections of laws. The Torah does not come to present a complete collection of laws, but rather to add to the laws which already are extant and accepted in society. In order to interpret the laws of the Torah, we must understand what the accepted laws are at that time, and what the Torah comes to change concerning them. An example of this may be found in *Shemot* 21:20, “When a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod, and he dies under his hand, he shall surely be avenged.” Cassuto notes ad loc.:

The slave is a human being as well, created in the image of God, and whoever violates the sanctity of his life must pay the price and be put to death. This is a significant innovation of the Torah, that the abovementioned law (v. 12), “He who strikes a man and he dies, he shall surely be put to death,” is applicable to a master who strikes his slave.

While the neighboring cultures of that era consider slaves to be the possession of their master, so that a master would not be subject to the death penalty for killing his slave,[[11]](#footnote-11) the Torah expresses an innovate idea: the life of the slave has value, and whoever takes it must pay the price.

Another example may be found later in the same chapter (v. 31), where the Torah mandates, concerning an ox which is known to gore, “If it gores a son or it gores a daughter, the same statute shall be applied to it.” Now, what difference could it make if the victim is a son or daughter (i.e. a minor) or an adult? Why would the Torah include this line?[[12]](#footnote-12)

Cassuto explains this in the following way:

The intention is to defy the legal tradition mandating that if one causes the death of another’s son, the guilty party’s son is put to death…

In other words, in the Ancient Near East, the accepted custom was to kill the son of someone who had killed another’s son. In this verse, the Torah addresses this law, accepted in the culture surrounding the Jewish people, and rejects it: only the ox and its owner are to be punished, not the son of the ox’s owner.

Now let us demonstrate how Cassuto relies on archeological findings. When God describes the Plague of Blood, he tells Moshe (*Shemot* 7:19):

There will be blood in all the land of Egypt, as well as in the *eitzim* and the *avanim*.

*Eitzim* (singular *eitz*, meaning wood or tree) and *avanim* (singular *even*, meaning stone or rock) are somewhat ambiguous terms. What does the verse mean? Rashi ad loc. translates the phrase as “as well as in wooden and stone vessels,” i.e. water stored in these containers will turn to blood. However, Cassuto finds it difficult to accept this, since most vessels for water in Egypt were made of pottery. Thus, he suggests an alternative explanation:

When we consider that the terms *eitz* and *even* are often used to refer to idols,[[13]](#footnote-13) and that the Egyptian priests would wash their idolatrous images every morning in water, we may hypothesize that the verse comes to tell us that even the water which has been poured that morning upon those idols will turn to blood, a further sort of mockery directed at the gods of Egypt.

This commentary dovetails with the overall them of the plague of blood, to make the gods of Egypt pay.

**The Significance of Paying Attention to Literary Tools**

An additional characteristic of Cassuto’s commentary is delving into literary phenomena in biblical units.

In his view, comprehending structure and form contributes to the understanding of the verse and the message emanating from it. This is what he writes in his introduction to *Shemot*:

In order to fully understand the verses, I have always paid attention to their aesthetic positioning as well.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Book of *Shemot* is not only a lofty religious document but also a superlative literary creation, and every literary creation demands that the reader understand the artistic methods by which it is formed, being sensitive to the beauty displayed upon it…

An excellent example of Cassuto’s paying attention to aesthetic arrangement, may be found in his commentary on the juxtaposition of the story of the war with Amalek (*Shemot* 17:8-16) to the story of Yitro’s arrival (ibid. 18:1-27). Biblical commentators, following Chazal, argue about the timing of Yitro’s visit. If we are to take the passages as being written in chronological order, Yitro arrives before the Giving of the Torah; if we assume that they are not necessarily in chronological order, Yitro may be assumed to have come after the Giving of the Torah.[[15]](#footnote-15) Ibn Ezra follows the latter view, and he maintains that the order serves to juxtapose the Yitro passage with the Amalek passage.[[16]](#footnote-16) Cassuto follows the ibn Ezra’s approach, but his innovation is expressed in his sensitivity to linguistic parallelism. Cassuto finds a linguistic parallel between the description of the war with Amalek and the description of Yitro’s arrival (in his introduction to *Parashat Yitro*):

The formulation of these passages, as it appears before us, is meant to contrast between the two matters. It says above (17:8), “**Amalek came and waged war** upon Israel,” while it says here (v. 5, 7), “**Yitro**, father-in-law of Moshe, **came**… Each inquired after the **peace** of his fellow.” There (17:9) it says, “**Select** **for us men**,” a selection for war, while here it says (v. 25), “And Moshe **selected men** of valor,” a selection for peace and justice. There it is told (17:12) of Moshe, “**And he sat** upon it,” on the stone to pray for victory in battle, while here (v. 13) it says, “**And Moshe sat** to judge the people.” There are other parallels, such as: “And Moshe’s hands were **heavy**” (17:12); “For the matter is too **heavy** for you” (18:18), et cetera…

Cassuto claims, based on these parallels, that these passages are purposefully put one after the other, to emphasize the great contrast between Amalek and Yitro, two foreigners reacting to the Exodus from Egypt: one comes to wages war against Israel, while the other is impressed and ties his fate to that of the Jewish people.

**The Significance of the *Leitwort***

One of the most significant innovations of Cassuto in the sphere of biblical commentary is determining the boundaries of a literary unit by identifying the *leitwort*. Cassuto was among the first[[17]](#footnote-17) to identify and develop this concept. Cassuto gives the *leitwort* a unique meaning which differs from the conventional understanding, both in his method of identifying the *leitwort* as well as defining its literary aim.

Generally, we may say that the *leitwort* is a certain word or root which appears in the text a number of times. The increased use of that word or root sometimes points to a central idea of the narrative.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to Cassuto, the most essential sign of a *leitwort* is the number of its appearances: when a word appears seven times (or a multiple of seven), this indicates that it is a *leitwort*. In Cassuto’s view, the number of appearances of a word is central and provides an interpretive tool to define the boundaries of the literary unit and to prove the unity of the narrative.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, for example, Cassuto points to the fact that the Ye’or (Nile) is mentioned fourteen times during the plague of blood, and based on this phenomenon (as well as other proofs), Cassuto states the following in his introduction to the Plagues:

Thus we may clearly say that we have an organic and unified creation, not the circumstantial result of a complex process which juxtaposes various texts from different sources, as some researchers believe — due to their own prejudices and superficial reading of the verses, without in-depth analysis of the verses’ intent or proper understanding of their structure. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Let us conclude with Cassuto’s final blessing in his opening lecture at Hebrew University.

May it be God’s will that our work and research and analysis will allow us to draw as close as possible to understanding the words of the verses as our earliest ancestors, for whom they were designated, understood them. May it be God’s will as well that just as the books of *Tanakh* have been a source of blessing for our ancestors, so may they be a sources of blessing for us, for our children and for our children’s children, inspiring our spirit and encouraging our heart to realize our fondest desires, to achieve the goal to which we dedicate our lives, the rebirth of the Nation of Israel in the Land of Israel.[[21]](#footnote-21)

1. Eventually, it became clear that Cassuto’s firing and emigration to Palestine saved his life. Cassuto did everything he could to acquire a visa for his son Nathan, but he ultimately failed, and Nathan remained in Italy. He was sent to Auschwitz in 1943, where he is presumed to have met his death. Hannah, Nathan’s wife, managed to emigrate to Palestine with their three children in 1945, and she worked in the laboratory of Hadassah Hospital at Mt. Scopus. Unfortunately, she too met a tragic end, as she was a victim of the Hadassah convoy massacre on 13 April, 1948. Cassuto dedicated the first part of his commentary on *Bereishit, From Noach to Avraham,* to their memory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, at length, Yosef Ofer, “The Aleppo Codex in Light of the Notes of M.D. Cassuto,” *Tzefunot* 68:4 (19) (1989), pp. 325-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The high regard in which Cassuto was held by his colleagues may be seen in the introduction to the second volume of *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, in which a number of lines are dedicated to the memory of its late chief editor:

About a year-and-a-half after the first volume was published, on 19 Kislev, 5712, the chief editor of the encyclopaedia, Professor Moshe David Cassuto, of blessed memory, was suddenly taken from us. He was a master of many disciplines, and he used his vast scholarship to illuminate and inform in his editorship of the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. It was difficult to find any one person who could fill his shoes as chief editor; indeed, the editorial board saw no way to complete the work of the deceased in this second volume except by marshaling the skills of a number of its members… [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chapters 1-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. After he died, his brother-in-law and student Elia Samuele Artom produced a concise commentary on the entire *Tanakh*. This commentary was presented by Yavneh Publishing House as “a commentary produced according to the Cassuto method,” hoping that Cassuto’s name would help sell the book. This edition became popular very quickly, and it is often referred to as *Tanakh Cassuto.* In 2006, the Tel Aviv District Court considered a case by Cassuto’s heirs against Yavneh Publishing House, but the court ultimately dismissed the suit. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. He indicates this clearly in his article “The Origins of Historiography in Israel” in his book, *Biblical Literature and Canaanite Literature: Studies in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East,* Volume I (Jerusalem: 1972), pp. 12-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Shadal also studied the Ancient Near East and used such research for his commentary; however, Shadal utilizes such material to enrich his commentary, while Cassuto considers it an immutable prerequisite for basic understanding of the biblical text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This idea, that many of the Torah’s narratives and laws reject the paganism which was accepted in the biblical era, is widespread throughout Cassuto’s commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We should note that only regarding the creation of man (*Bereishit* 1:27) and the creation of the *tanninim* (ibid. v. 21) the verse uses the root *bet-reish-alef*, this emphasizes that God is the creator of them, a point which dovetails with Cassuto’s words. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, *Yeshayahu* 27:1:

On that day,

God will punish with his sword —
His fierce, great and powerful sword —
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;
He will slay the monster (*tannin*) of the sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hammurabi’s Code, which was the law in ancient Babylonia, states that whoever causes the death of his fellow’s slave must pay with another slave (Para. 231) — i.e. there is no death penalty for killing a slave. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. However, see Ramban’s explanation ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g. *Devarim* 4:28, 28:36; *Yeshayahu* 37:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Positioning” seems to refer to the way the verses are arranged. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See *Mekhilta* 18; BT *Zevachim* 116b; Rashi, Ramban, ibn Ezra et al., *Shemot* 18:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is what he says (*Shemot* 18:1):

“And Yitro heard” — The matter of Amalek is mentioned above, as they come to Refidim (*Shemot* 17:8). It would have been appropriate for the passage of “In the third month” (*Shemot* 19:1) to be written after the matter of Amalek, for there it is written (ibid.), “And they travelled from Refidim, and they came to the Wilderness of Sinai…” Now I will explain why the passage of Yitro was put in this place, because above is mentioned the evil which Amalek does to Israel, so it mentions here correspondingly the good which Yitro does to Israel… [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Indeed, Martin Buber is famous for developing the concept of the *leitwort* as a method for biblical analysis together with Franz Rosenzweig (see *Darko shel Mikra* [Jerusalem: 1964], p. 284), but Cassuto developed the concept in parallel to Buber, but with a slightly different application, as we shall see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This series is not the appropriate forum to address numerous nuances and the different methods for applying the understanding of the role of the *leitwort*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cassuto often uses the *leitwort* to prove the unity of the narrative opposing the documentary hypothesis, which claims that narratives in the Torah are woven together from many sources. Thus, for example, he writes in his commentary on *Bereishit* 1:1, in his introduction to the story of Creation:

This numerical harmony is a common thread tying together all the parts of the passage, and it works as a decisive proof of its unity, against the view of those… who believe that the passage is not unified, but rather formed by the integration and interweaving of two separate editions… [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We should note that Cassuto acknowledges a *leitwort* which is not in groupings of seven, but in his view, the aim of this word is not to point to the unity of the narrative and its delineation, but rather to emphasize and to create a connection to the previous narrative, in which the word appears frequently. For example, in the story of Moshe’s youth (*Shemot* 2:11-15), the Torah tells us:

It was in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren, and he saw their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man from his brethren. And he turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no man, so he struck the Egyptian man and hid him in the sand.

Cassuto comments:

The phrase “and he saw” appears three times in this passage, which emphasizes it, and thus it parallels “and she saw” in the previous passage (detailing the birth of Moshe and his discovery by Pharaoh’s daughter), which also appears three times. This phenomenon is not mere happenstance in the style of the biblical lexicon: rather, just as his mother shows compassion to him and Pharaoh’s daughter shows compassion to him, he shows compassion to his brethren, pitying them and sympathizing with their suffering…

In this passage, there is no central word, but words are repeated in a way that is certainly not circumstantial, but comes to emphasize something. Initially, we have three occurrences of “and he saw,” which serves as a sort of link to the previous passage; then three times the verb for “striking;” and then three times the verb for “killing.”

Cassuto does not explicitly state what the latter two terms are meant to emphasize, but it appears that the threefold repetition of “striking” and “killing” serve as an introduction and background for the Plagues (literally “strikings”), culminating in the killing of every firstborn in the land of Egypt, as punishment for the “Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man.” Indeed, we do find similar language when the Torah describes the slaying of the firstborn: “And I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt” (ibid. 12:12), “And God struck every firstborn in the land of Egypt” (12:29), and “And God killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt” (13:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. M.D. Cassuto, *Biblical Literature and Canaanite Literature: Studies in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East,* Volume I (Jerusalem: 1972), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)