



## **Written in Stone? Writing and Rewriting the Bible**

***Dr. Benjamin Sommer***

**Benjamin D. Sommer** joined The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty as professor of Bible in July 2008. Previously, he served as director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, where he had taught since 1994. Dr. Sommer has been a fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tikvah Center for Jewish Law and Civilization at the New York University School of Law, and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He has served as a visiting faculty member in the Department of Bible of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He has received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation.

Dr. Sommer's most recent book, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* received the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Prize in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University for the years 2014-2016 and was a finalist for both for the National Jewish Book Award for 2015 and the Association for Jewish Studies' Jordan Schnitzer Prize for 2014-2016. A Hebrew edition of the book, *התגלות וסמכות: סיני במקרא ובמסורת*, was published by Carmel Publishing House in Jerusalem in 2022. An earlier book by Professor Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2010 awarded by the American Academy of Religion, as well as the Jordan Schnitzer Award from the Association for Jewish Studies for the years 2006-2009. The first book Dr. Sommer published, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Religion. Dr. Sommer has long been active as a lecturer and scholar-in-residence, teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and laypeople in a variety of settings in the United States and Israel.

## CASE #1: DEUTERONOMY 32

### Deuteronomy 32:8 in the Masoretic Text:

בְּהִנְחֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יִצַּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

NJPS translation:

When the Most High gave nations their homes  
And set the divisions of man,  
He fixed the boundaries of peoples  
In relation to Israel's numbers.

### Deuteronomy 32:8 in various ancient versions:

The Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q37, 12:13–14):

בהנחיל [ל עליון גוים בהפרידו בני אדם יצב גבלת עמים למספר] בני אלוהים

4Q37, 12:13–14, my translation:

When the Most High gave nations their homes  
And set the divisions of man,  
He fixed the boundaries of peoples  
In relation to the numbers of the gods.

The Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Tanakh):

στε διεμέριζεν ο υψιστος ἔθνη,  
ως διέσπειρεν υιοὺς Ἀδάμ,  
ἔστησεν ορια ἔθνῶν  
κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ.

*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford University Press, 2007):

When the Most High was apportioning nations,  
as he scattered Adam's sons,  
he fixed boundaries of nations  
according to the number of divine sons.

Targum Jonathan (an ancient Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Pentateuch):

באחסנות עילאה עלמא לעממיא די נפקו מבנוי דנח באפרשותיה מכתבין ולישנין לבני־נשא בדרא דפלגותא בי  
היא זימנא רמא פיצתא עם שובעין מלאכיא רברבי עממין דאתגלי עימהון למחמי קרתא ובי היא זימנא אקים  
תחומי אומיא כסכום מניין שובעין נפשתא דישראל דנחתו למצרים

*Targum Jonathan (English)*, by Dr. Eldon Clem (OakTree Software [Accordance], 2015):

When the Most High gave the world as an inheritance to the nations who had come out of the children of Noah, when He had set aside their writing systems and their languages to mankind in the generation of the division, in which time He cast lots with the 70 angels, the princes of the nations with whom he had been revealed with them to see the city, and in which time he established the borders of the nations according to the number of the 70 souls of Israel who went down to Egypt.

### **Deuteronomy 32:43 in the Masoretic text:**

הֲרַנְיֵנוּ גוֹיִם עַמּוֹ כִּי דַם־עַבְדָּיו יִקְוֶם וְנִקְּמָם יֵשִׁיב לְצַרְיָו וְכִפֵּר אֶדְמָתוֹ עָמוֹ:

NJPS translation:

O nations, acclaim His people!  
For He'll avenge the blood of His servants,  
Wreak vengeance on His foes,  
And cleanse the land of His people.

### **Deuteronomy 32:43 in various ancient versions:**

The Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q44, f5ii:5–11):

הרנינו שמים עמו והשתחוּו לו כל אלהים כי דם בניו יקום ונקם ישיב לצריו ולמשנאיו ישלם וכפר אדמת עמו

4Q44, f5ii:5–11, my translation

O heavens, rejoice with Him!  
And bow down to Him, all you gods!  
For He'll avenge the blood of His children,  
Wreak vengeance on His foes,  
He'll bring payback to those who hate Him,  
And cleanse the land of His people.

The Septuagint:

εὐφράνθητε, οὐρανοί, αμα αὐτῷ,  
καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ·  
εὐφράνθητε, ἔθνη, μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ,  
καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ·

οτι τὸ αἷμα τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ ἐκδικᾶται,  
καὶ ἐκδικήσει καὶ ἀνταποδώσει δίκην τοῖς ἐχθροῖς  
καὶ τοῖς μισοῦσιν ἀνταποδώσει,  
καὶ ἐκκαθαριεῖ κύριος τὴν γῆν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ.

*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford University Press, 2007):

Be glad, O skies, with him,  
and let all the divine sons do obeisance to him.  
Be glad, O nations, with his people,  
and let all the angels of God prevail for him.  
For he will avenge the blood of his sons  
and take revenge and repay the enemies with a sentence,  
and he will repay those who hate,  
and the Lord shall cleanse the land of his people.

## CASE #2: DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

(I.) **From the Jewish Liturgy.** A passage read in *Selihot* prayers, in non-Ashkenazic *Tahanun* prayers, and in the Torah Service on holidays (my translation):

יְ-הוָה יְ-הוָה אֱ-ל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת נִצֵּר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים נִשְׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה

**The LORD, the LORD, God, Who is compassionate, and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and truth. He preserves kindness for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and cleansing [the penitent].**

⇒ “forgiving” = נושא

*Note: For the passages below, we have included Hebrew for the bolded text only. The English translation in the passages below are the NJPS translation.*

(II.) **Exodus 34:5–7**

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְ-הוָה עַל-פְּנֵינוּ וַיִּקְרָא יְ-הוָה אֱ-ל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת ז. נִצֵּר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים נִשְׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְעַל בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל רְבָעִים.

4. So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him.
5. The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name LORD.
6. **The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: “The LORD! the LORD! a a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness,**
7. **extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”**  
⇒ JPS’s “forgiving” = נושא; better: “holding up, holding in abeyance”
8. Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage,
9. and said, “If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiff-necked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!”

### (III.) Numbers 14:11–13a, 17b–20

יח? הנה ארץ אפים ורב חסד נשא עון ופושע ונקה לא ינקה פקד עון אבות על בנים על שלשים ועל רבעים.

11. And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst?”
12. I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!”
13. But Moses said to the LORD, . . .
17. . . . “Let my Lord’s forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying,
18. **‘The LORD! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.’**  
⇒ “forgiving” = נושא; better: “holding up, holding in abeyance”
19. Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.”
20. And the LORD said, “I pardon, as you have asked.”

### (IV.) Psalm 99:6–8

6. Moses and Aaron among His priests,  
Samuel, among those who call on His name—  
when they called to the LORD,  
He answered them.
7. He spoke to them in a pillar of cloud;  
they obeyed His decrees,  
the law He gave them.
8. O LORD our God, You answered them;  
**You were a forgiving God for them,** א-ל נושא הַיִּתְּ לָהֶם  
but You exacted retribution for their misdeeds.  
⇒ “forgiving” = נושא; better: “holding up, holding in abeyance”

(V.) Psalm 103:6–13

ת רחום וחסון י-הוה  
ארץ אפים ורב חסד.  
ט לא לנצח יריב  
ולא לעולם יטור.

6. The LORD executes righteous acts and judgments for all who are wronged.
7. He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the children of Israel.
8. **The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.**
9. **He will not contend forever, or nurse His anger for all time.**
10. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He requited us according to our iniquities.
11. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him.
12. As east is far from west, so far has He removed our sins from us.
13. As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear Him.

(VI.) Jonah 4:2b

ב כי ידעתי כי אתה א-ל חסון ורחום ארץ אפים ורב חסד ונקם על הרעה.

- 2b. For I know that **You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing (וְנָקָם) punishment.**

## (VII.) Deuteronomy 7:7–11

ט וַיִּדְעַתָּה כִּי? הַנְּהָא אֶל־לֵהִיךְ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים-לְהֵימֶן: הָאֱלֹהִים-לְהֵימֶן שָׁמַר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֲסֵד לְאַהֲבָיו וּלְשִׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו לְאַלְפֵי דְוָר. י וּמִשְׁלָם לְשִׁנְאוֹ אֶל-פְּנֵיו לְהַאֲבִידוֹ: לֹא יִצְחַר לְשִׁנְאוֹ אֶל-פְּנֵיו יְשָׁלֵם לוֹ.

7. It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples;
8. but it was because the LORD favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.
9. Know, therefore, that only **the LORD your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments,**
10. **but who instantly requites with destruction those who reject Him—never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly.**
11. Therefore, observe faithfully the Instruction—the laws and the rules—with which I charge you today.